

Greatest 211

Chapter 211 - Returning Home I

After spending a day of enjoyable time visiting Mr. Stein in the exclusive neighborhood of Fjellsiden, Zachary finally set off for DR Congo with Kristin on the following morning.

As he gazed out of the airplane window, watching the neat city of Bergen fade away, he couldn't help but feel his life was like a dream — a pretty amazing one at that.

It hadn't even been three years since his initial arrival in Norway as an academy player. Even before turning nineteen, he'd already established himself on the Rosenborg senior team as a consistent member of the starting lineup.

His football skills were already eons better than they'd been at his peak during his previous life — thanks to the system. He was even on the list of potential top scorers in the Tippeligaen just from his wildly successful debut month.

"Look at this," Kristin suddenly said from the seat beside him, holding out her smartphone towards him. She had returned to her cheery self after a day's rest. "It says here that you're the favorite to win the 'Best Player' award for May. The only other serious competitors for the honor are Nicki Nielsen, your teammate, Stefan Johansen, a Strømsgodset midfielder, and Frode Johnsen from Odds BK. Though, I'm pretty sure you'll come out on top since none of them come close to matching your form these past few matches. So, I guess congratulations are in order."

"Is that so?" Zachary said, leaning closer to Kristin to look at the phone screen. Indeed, he could see a headline listing him and a few others as the best performing players for the first half of the football season in Norway. The article also mentioned he was one of the three Rosenborg players included in the Tippeligaen team of the month. However, it also stated that the list was only provisional and was subject to changes after the meeting of the voting committee. So, it was basically gossip with nothing confirmed.

"That's quite a long list," he said, withdrawing his gaze from the phone screen. "I don't think it's a sure deal that I'll receive the honor. If I recall correctly, Stefan Johansen, the guy from Strømsgodset, seems to have some crazy stats, especially when considering the number of assists he has. So, it will solely depend on the voting committee. And you know how those people can be."

"Well," Kristin said, withdrawing her phone. "At least the press has already accepted you as the best player for May. The leaders, coaches, players, and officials of the Tippeligaen will probably follow suit and do the same soon."

"All we can do is wait for the official announcement," Zachary said, shaking his head. "There is no need for speculation. But that aside, what are your plans when we arrive in Lubumbashi? Do you want me to host you, or should we check you into a hotel?"

"One of my grandpa's associates has already booked me a hotel room in Lubumbashi," Kristin replied. "So, there's no need for you to become my host."

"That's convenient, I guess," Zachary said, inclining his head to give her a brief glance. He couldn't help but think that perhaps the saying 'to get over someone, you should get under someone' had some truth to it.

After getting intimate with Camilla, he was no longer the least bit uncomfortable in Kristin's presence. The raging emotions he had previously felt every time he laid eyes on her had disappeared as if they had never existed in the first place.

"Is there something off about my face?" Kristin queried after noticing his gaze. "Why're you looking at me so intently?"

Zachary sighed deeply. "I was just admiring your pretty face and thinking to myself: it would be nice to host her in Lubumbashi," he said jokingly. "What a letdown to find out you already have arrangements."

Kristin reacted immediately, inclining her head to give Zachary a daunting 'are you serious?' look. She seemed genuinely shocked by his attempt at humor.

"So, do you want me to be your host or not?" Zachary asked, scratching his chin, hoping to dispel the awkward atmosphere between them.

"Forget it," Kristin muttered in a barely audible voice as she finally turned away. "What if your girlfriend finds out? I don't want to be enemies with someone I don't even know personally."

"What?" Zachary exclaimed, giving her his full attention once more.

"I said forget it," Kristin said, a soft smile then playing on her face. "From my previous experience, hotels are the safest places for foreigners in Lubumbashi. Maybe, you should also consider checking into a hotel. You're now basically a foreigner in Congo since you've spent more than two years away from the place."

"That is a big no for me," Zachary said, shaking his head. "If I sleep in a hotel, I'll miss my grandma's cooking. I'll only be spending tonight in a hotel because we'll be arriving in Lubumbashi late. After that, I'll head home and spend some quality time there. That's my plan."

"Well, suit yourself," Kristin muttered, leaning back into her seat and suppressing a yawn. "I'm starting to feel tired. I need a few hours of sleep. Please don't wake me in the next couple of hours."

"Sweet dreams, then," Zachary said, nodding.

Zachary and Kristin exited the plane with their hand luggage in tow after it landed at Lubumbashi International Airport at eleven on the night of the same day. When they stepped out into the open, the warm tropical breeze, blowing gently across the airport tarmac, immediately assaulted them, refreshing their numb senses, despite the hour being so late.

Zachary looked up at the blanket of stars that stretched to infinity — then at the numerous aircraft spread out across the blacktop of the airport. He finally rested his gaze on the terminal leading to the arrivals hallway. He couldn't help but smile. The feeling of being back home was blissful.

However, he didn't dilly-dally immersing himself in the sensation. He moved quickly, together with Kristin, to collect their luggage and finish the necessary procedures at the airport. A few minutes later, the two of them were already rushing to the immigration offices.

Two male officials stood in the booth, which served as the immigration control office, looking tired since it was already late in the night. They didn't give Zachary a hard time as he was a very 'understanding'

client and knew how things worked in DRC. Without batting an eyelid, he tipped the officials to motivate them to work on him pronto.

After receiving the bribes, the immigration officials seemed to have experienced an energy refill. Their lethargic looks quickly disappeared.

A moment later, they were all smiles as they helped him complete his paperwork and processed Kristin's temporary visa.

"Here you go, sir," one of the officials said, handing Zachary his travel documentation after a few minutes. "And here you go, beautiful madam," he added, turning to Kristin and bowing slightly at the waist. "Please, enjoy your stay in Lubumbashi."

"Thank you, sir," Kristin replied, smiling and receiving her visa.

"You're welcome," the official said, smiling back. "Is there anything else you need help with, sir, madam?"

"Well," Zachary said, smiling at the official. "Could you maybe direct us to where we can hire a taxi cab?"

"Oh, that's easy," the official said, tone humble. "When you are just heading out of the airport exit, you'll see the taxis for hire in the parking space on your left. You can't miss them since the drivers will all swarm towards you the moment you walk out of the exit."

"Okay, thanks a lot for your help," Zachary said, shaking the hands of the two officials, one after the other. Since he was pleased with their efficiency, he, of course, gifted them a few more Euros. They were ecstatic and thanked him emphatically as they pocketed the money.

"That was quick," Kristin commented just after they'd departed from the immigration control office. The two of them were towing their suitcases, headed for the airport exit. "The last time I was here with my grandpa," she continued, "We spent more than four hours going through the procedures."

"Well," Zachary said, inclining his head to smile at her. "Money moves everything here in DRC. If you can gift the person working on your case a few dollars, he'll be more efficient in handling your case."

"You gave them money!" Kristin exclaimed, raising a brow. "When was that? How come I didn't notice?"

"That's the idea," Zachary said, grinning. "No one is supposed to notice."

Kristin sighed, giving Zachary a sideways glance as they trekked through the airport hallway. "But isn't that like illegal?" She whispered.

"Well, no one cares?" Zachary said. "This isn't Norway. Moreover, they didn't ask for bribes. It was solely my decision to tip them so as to encourage them to work on us faster. It's like how you go to a hotel and tip a waitress after she has given you good service."

Chapter 212 - Returning Home II

Kristin chuckled as they continued towing their suitcases towards the airport exit. "Well, that's some justification you have there for taking part in bribery. How come no one recognizes you here? Shouldn't you be like famous in your home country?"

"I have only been playing professionally for a month," Zachary replied. "Moreover, it's in the Tippeligaen — a league that has almost no viewership in Africa. So, I would be surprised if people here knew me."

"Oh, then your chances of being called for the national team duty must be quite minimal," Kristin remarked.

"That's true," Zachary confirmed, sighing. "But if there's a coach who has been closely following my progress in Norway, then I might get a chance."

"So, are you going to spend the night in a hotel, or will you be heading directly home?"

Zachary glanced at his watch. "Since it is already close to midnight, I'll have to postpone returning home until tomorrow morning," he said. "I don't feel at ease traveling into the far-off neighborhoods this late at night."

Zachary ended up checking into the Planet Hollybum Hotel with Kristin and spending the night there. The following morning, right after he had taken some breakfast, he called Coach Samson Damata to inform him of his arrival in Lubumbashi.

The coach had been Zachary's go-to person to handle any business or arrange anything his grandma needed in Lubumbashi. He'd successfully managed most of Zachary's affairs during his absence and even helped purchase his grandma's house so she could move from Bukavu to Lubumbashi. He was a trustworthy person and hadn't yet tried to cheat him in any way. Besides, he was the only coach that had made an attempt to link Zachary to a professional team way after his trials. So, he was eager to meet him again after a long separation of more than two years.

"Welcome back home, big man," the plump, aged coach said, laughing heartily, as soon as he approached Zachary's table in the Planet Hollybum Hotel's restaurant. "How are you?" He asked, speaking in French.

"I'm more than fine, coach," Zachary replied, using the same language and rising from his seat to give the man a bear hug.

"That's great," Coach Damata said, returning the hug. "You've grown very tall since the last time I saw you. It seems you're eating well there in Europe. Your grandma will be thrilled when she sees you." He gave a hearty laugh once more and stepped back.

"How is she?" Zachary asked, also taking a step back and returning to his seat. "Has she finally managed to settle down in her new home yet?"

Coach Damata chuckled, giving Zachary an arch look. "She has long gotten used to the new residence," he replied, also settling down in a seat opposite Zachary's. "She's having a good time there. When you return home, you'll understand what I mean."

"Oh. Then, I'm relieved. What about you, coach? How have you been doing, and how's everything on your side?"

"I'm fine but often tired these days," Coach Damata replied, sighing. "It's the same old hustle here. We're trying to organize for the upcoming World Cup qualifying matches against Libya and Cameroon."

"Oh," Zachary said, raising a brow. "Are you on the organizing committee?"

"Yes. But just as an assistant, of course."

"Then you must have some knowledge of the squad selection. Don't you?"

"Yes, I do," Coach Damata replied, sighing. "For the match against Libya, scheduled for June 6th, the coach has decided to go with a more experienced squad. He mainly selected the players who participated in the previous African Nations Cup back in January. So, your name is not on the list this time around."

"Oh," Zachary said, feeling a little disappointment streak through him like a comet. Although he'd already suspected he wouldn't make it onto the national team, confirming it still soured his mood. At the very back of his mind, he'd been hoping he would get the chance to play in another tournament other than the Norwegian leagues in the near future. But it seemed the DR Congo national team coaches had not yet recognized him as fit enough to represent the country.

"I know you must be feeling disappointed," Coach Damata said after noticing his change in mood. "It's quite a letdown to not make the squad even after the way you've been performing since making your debut. But you've got to know that coaches rarely follow the goings-on in the Norwegian leagues. That's why they are going with midfielders like Cédric Makiadi and Lomana LuaLua — who are from well-established clubs."

"Well, I understand," Zachary said, letting out a breath of pent-up air and forcing a smile onto his face. It was never good to face rejection of whatever kind. But, after recalling Coach Johansen's advice a moment later, he finally relaxed, pushing the matter of the national team to the back of his mind. At the very least, he would get to keep his coach happy by keeping his playing time minimal.

"I'm glad you've taken the news well," Coach Damata said, still observing him closely. "But I promise over the next few months, I'll start showing videos from your matches to the rest of the coaching staff so that this doesn't happen again."

"Thanks, coach," Zachary said, flashing the aged man a grin. "You don't have to do all that. Moreover, I probably wouldn't have agreed to the call."

"Oh, why is that?" Coach Damata probed, creasing his brow.

"The team physician back in Norway has recommended I keep my match count to the bare minimum since I've just experienced a growth spurt. You must have noticed the problem based on my current height. I'm way taller than I was during the trials." He'd decided to give a reason in order to avoid burdening the old coach with more issues. He was already doing enough by occasionally checking on his grandma from time to time. So, he didn't want to add more to his plate.

"Oh, a growth spurt!" Coach Damata exclaimed, giving him a once-over from across the table. "Is that why you missed most of the opening matches of the season?"

"Yes, that's why the coaches kept me out of the squad for some time."

"Are you okay now?" Coach Damata inquired, seemingly very concerned. "Do you feel any joint pains or any discomfort in your muscles?"

"Not at all," Zachary replied, shaking his head. "As I said, the coaches are keeping my match count low. So, I've managed to deal with it without any complications."

"That's good, then," Coach Damata said, seemingly relaxing. "Your health is paramount. So, don't try to play when you're feeling any discomfort. Okay?"

"Yes, coach," Zachary replied, nodding. "I understand."

"Good," Coach Damata said, grinning and caressing his long goatee. "So, should we go see your grandma? I'm sure you're eager to get a look at her new residence in Lubumbashi."

"Yes, we can go right after I say goodbye to my friend who traveled with me back here," Zachary said. "I'm sure you know her as well. She is Kristin, the granddaughter of Mr. Martin Stein, the scout who took Kasongo and me to Norway."

"You mean the young girl who claimed that she was a scout in training?"

"Yes," Zachary replied, nodding. "That's the one."

"Could she be here on another scouting mission?" Coach Damata asked, his voice rising a bit.

"No," Zachary said, shaking his head. "She's just here as a tourist on tour. So, don't try to bother her with any football-related stuff."

"Oh! What a letdown! How's Mr. Stein, by the way? How come he's no longer coming to visit us in Lubumbashi?"

"He's doing okay," Zachary said, in the spirit of not disclosing any personal information about the old scout. "When I go back, I'll tell him to contact you."

"That'll be good," Coach Damata said, grinning. "If he could scout more players from here, it would do our country good."

"Before I forget," Zachary said, "What's the status of the vehicle I shipped here a few weeks back? Has it arrived yet?"

"Yes," Coach Damata replied, nodding. "The Audi arrived in Lubumbashi two days ago. I had someone drive it and park it at your grandma's residence. After that, I left the keys with her."

"Oh, thanks a lot for your help," Zachary said, grinning. "I don't know how I would have managed the shipment without you here in Lubumbashi to receive it."

"You don't need to say thanks," Coach Damata said, waving an arm about him in a dismissive gesture. "Your grandma and I are good friends. Helping her grandson is a pleasure."

"But thanks anyway," Zachary said, standing up from his seat. "I'll quickly say goodbye to my friend upstairs, and then we can be on our way. Do you want to order anything in the meantime?"

"No," Coach Damata said, tone firm. "I just had some breakfast. Just go and finish up. Don't worry about me. I'll wait for you here."

"Okay, thanks," Zachary said. "I'll be back in a minute."

Chapter 213 - Returning Home III

A thousand memories flooded through Zachary's mind as they traversed the familiar roads of Lubumbashi in Coach Damata's Datsun pickup truck, heading for his grandma's residence. They had just passed some familiar landmarks from his previous life. Among them were the TP Mazembe Stadium and the little market where he used to shop with his ex-fiancé, Anita.

He couldn't help but sigh as he recalled the hard life he'd lived before his return to the past. The story of his previous incarnation was so tragic that it could feasibly be turned into a best-seller. He'd lost everything, including his fiancée, talent, career, and his close family. But luckily, he'd gotten a second chance. Because of that, he was resolute in pursuing the goals he had set for himself in his new life. He was determined to make sure he never fell into similar dire straits.

Sad memories aside, the city of Lubumbashi looked just the way he remembered it. All the neighborhoods they drove through on their way up north had a distinctly Congolese flavor. Buildings were placed haphazardly all over the place and overlooked potholed roads.

As they drove through bustling streets, Zachary's ears picked up sounds of laughter and noise from hawkers peddling their wares — all with a backdrop of catchy Lingala music. He couldn't help but smile as he relished the feeling of returning home. There was a simplicity to the way of life his countrymen followed that he'd almost forgotten after living in Europe for more than two years. Everything was different and down to earth.

But occasionally, his nose would detect the foul smell of garbage, or he would see street children begging by the roadside. That reminded him of the sub-par service delivery and poor governance that was the tune in most of his home country's cities.

"We have arrived," Coach Damata said after a few more minutes of driving. He steered the truck off the murram road to a narrower lane.

"Oh," Zachary said, feeling his heartbeat quicken as he gazed out of the window. Along the lane were small but neat houses surrounded by perimeter fences. He could tell right away that his grandma's residence was located in a very cozy neighborhood by Lubumbashi's standards.

"I can see you managed to find a good and neat neighborhood close to the town center," he said after taking in the scenery around. "That's good. Thank you very much for everything."

"No problem," Coach Damata said, steering the vehicle off the lane — towards the gate of one of the small residences encircled by a solid perimeter wall. "This is the place. Welcome to your home, Zachary." He added, smiling and hooting.

Half a minute later, a young boy, who looked about 10 or 12, opened the gate and yelled, "Coach Damata is back," in Swahili. He opened the gate winder with a big grin on his face. Nonetheless, his actions did not stop him from continuing to announce the coach's arrival at the top of his lungs.

"You seem very popular here," Zachary remarked, inclining his head to look at Coach Damata. "Who is he?" He asked since the boy was certainly too young to be a laborer at his grandma's place.

Coach Damata smiled on hearing the question. But just as he was about to answer, five more kids of ages varying from about five to twelve swarmed the gate. They joined the first in yelling the same slogan: 'Coach Damata is here' repeatedly. It seemed seeing Coach Damata's Datsun truck had long turned into a great source of joy for them.

"Okay, now I'm confused," Zachary said, looking at all the commotion ahead of them. "Are you sure we're at my grandma's residence or some daycare? What are all the kids doing here?"

"This is the place," Coach Damata said, slowly steering the vehicle into the gate, past the excited kids. "You should direct those questions at your grandma. She's the owner of the place, and I'm usually just a visitor."

"Oh, okay then," Zachary said, nodding and checking himself.

A few seconds later, Coach Damata pulled up in front of the garage of the neat house. Zachary said his thanks before exiting and lifting his case from the cabin of the pickup truck. But, before he could take a single step towards the front entrance, he heard one of the kids shouting again in the distance.

"Grandma," he yelled in Swahili from somewhere behind the house. "Coach Damata has come with a very tall man with long hair like a Rasta's. He's carrying a massive suitcase with him."

"Grandma!?" Zachary mumbled, raising a brow and giving Coach Damata a 'what's going on?' look. During his previous life, he'd rarely met any of his cousins. That was because there had barely been any guests at his grandma's farm in Bukavu. So, he was startled to find several kids at his grandma's new residence.

Coach Damata shrugged in response to his question, waving to one of the kids in the distance. "It seems they're a bit intimidated by your height. Otherwise, they would have already swarmed me by now." He said before approaching the front entrance.

Zachary followed suit with his suitcase in tow. His heartbeat raced in anticipation of a reunion with the sole parental figure he'd ever known. Thankfully, she was still alive and well in his current life, unlike in his past one.

An aged woman stepped out of the door onto the front shade before they could make it there. She looked exactly like Zachary remembered — with the same warm smile that could warm his soul from the inside whenever he was before her.

"Coach," she said, smiling as she stepped further out of the door. "Welcome! The kids are telling me that you brought along a tall giant..." She stopped midsentence and did a double-take as her gaze landed on Zachary.

"Grandma, I'm back," Zachary said, smiling but standing still in place. "How have you been?"

"Is that you, Zachary?" She asked in Swahili, moving closer to him and observing him.

"Of course, it's me," Zachary said, feeling a bit awkward. All the thrill of meeting his grandma evaporated after that question. "Who else could it be?"

"Then, how come I don't recognize you?" She said, moving around him, seemingly to observe him more closely. "Are you sure you're Zachary? Or, as the kids say, you are some giant that Coach Damata picked up from somewhere."

Coach Damata couldn't help but laugh from beside him at the aged woman's reaction.

"Stop with the teasing and jokes, grandma," Zachary said, sighing with frustration. He'd almost forgotten that even in her old age, she enjoyed playing pranks on people.

"I got you with that," she said, finally smiling and pulling him into a hug. "Welcome back home, Zachary. How have you been doing?"

"I'm fine," Zachary said, bending slightly and allowing himself to soak into his grandma's embrace. "How have you been, grandma?"

"I'm doing well, but I miss my farm and animals," she said, stepping back. "You have grown, Zachary. With that height of yours, you're starting to look more and more like your..." She trailed off midsentence, looking away.

Zachary raised a brow at that. But he still chose to move the conversation in another direction since he knew that they weren't in the right place to discuss more personal issues.

"So, how are you finding the new place, grandma?" He asked, smiling at her.

"Although it can't compare to my farm back in Bukavu, it's still fine," she replied, smiling back at him. "Please, come inside. We shouldn't continue talking in front of the door as if we're strangers."

"Coach Damata!" She continued, turning towards the plump, aged man. "How's your morning? Sorry for keeping you waiting outside."

"My morning is fine, Mrs. Bemba," Coach Damata replied, grinning. "I don't mind standing outside. Welcoming your grandson after more than two years should take priority."

"Well, thank you for bringing him home," Zachary's grandma said, smiling. "But, let's enter the house first."

"Thank you," Coach Damata replied. "But I need to return to town to handle some urgent business. So, I won't be entering the house. But I'll return to visit after a while."

"Won't you eat something before you leave?" Zachary's grandma asked, raising a brow. "How can I let you leave on an empty stomach after visiting me?"

"No, Mrs. Bemba," Coach Damata replied, shaking his head. "I'm needed at the stadium in around fifteen minutes. So, I've got to run."

"Grandma," Zachary chimed in on seeing her insistence. "The coach has important duties to perform for our national team. So, we can't delay him."

"Then I guess it's a goodbye, for now, coach," she said. "And thanks again for giving Zachary a ride here."

"He's one of the greatest football talents that I've ever come across." Coach Damata said, smiling. "So, it's always my pleasure to help him."

"Is that so?" Zachary's grandma questioned, turning towards him. "Are you as good as the coach says? How come I haven't seen you on TV?"

Zachary could only smile wryly at that since he knew that she was back into her teasing mode. He chose to ignore her and turned towards Coach Damata. "Thank you for everything. But I think you should make a move on it, or you'll be late."

"Okay then, Zachary," the coach replied. "Don't forget to call if you need anything. I'll also call you if there are any new developments with the national team."

"Okay, great."

Chapter 214 - A Talk With The Grandma I

A week flew by while Zachary enjoyed the homely atmosphere at his grandma's place. He grew to appreciate the saying 'East or West, home is best' with every passing day.

He felt so loved and relished every moment he spent there. His mind totally relaxed from its usual tense state as he took on a free-spirited mood like a bird soaring in the skies.

His grandma was as perfect a host as he remembered. She treated him like the most cherished of guests, spoiling him with her delightful cooking, which could rival that of the most famous chefs in Lubumbashi. Be it dishes like fried goat's meat and steamed bananas, or delicious sauce like mushroom soup, Zachary feasted on it all in the first few days of his stay there.

During meal times, Zachary would tell her about his experiences in Europe. By the eighth day, he'd already narrated almost everything to her, starting from his academy days and ending with his latest Tippeligaen fixture performance.

Her reactions to some of his stories often left him at a loss for words. She would regularly interpose and say: 'Stop deceiving me' or 'How come I haven't seen you on TV?' On such occasions, Zachary found it hard to continue the story. He would then often head off to his room to rest without another word.

On the ninth day, at the dinner table, Zachary finally mustered the courage to ask his grandma about some issues that'd been bugging him since his arrival. Since the young kids had already gone to their rooms to rest for the night, he reckoned it was the perfect opportunity to make his queries.

"Grandma," he began, looking at her from across the table covered with mouth-watering African dishes.

"Yes, Zachary," she replied, raising a brow. "Why do you seem so nervous? Just go ahead and ask whatever you have to ask? Don't act like a young girl."

"Well, grandma," he said, smiling wryly. "I was wondering about the cousins of mine staying here. Who are they exactly?" He asked, tone cautious.

"Well, they're your cousins, of course," she replied matter-of-factly. "Two of the kids, Joel and Joshua, belong to your aunt, who is currently in the United Arab Emirates for work. The young girl, Lily, is the child of the cousin of the husband of that same aunt of yours. She also accompanied your aunt to UAE. The remaining two, Trésor and Yannick, belong to another aunt of yours."

"Oh," Zachary said, surprised and worried. He was afraid that taking care of all the kids would tire out his grandma. There was a chance it would affect her health and well-being if she wasn't careful. But since his grandma had always been a kind person by nature, who'd raised him single-handedly, he decided not to mention the issue.

"Why do you seem displeased?" His grandma probed, closely watching him from across the table. She'd apparently noticed his slight shift in mood.

"Zachary, do you not want me taking care of the kids?" She continued in a somber tone after not getting a response. "Would you prefer that I send the kids away from here to the streets?"

"I didn't say anything, grandma," Zachary was quick to reply while raising his hand in a pacifying gesture. "Those are your own speculations."

"Then, why did you raise your left eyebrow?" She demanded, seemingly amused. "You only do that when you're frustrated or angry. So, don't lie to me."

"I was only thinking about other stuff, not the kids," Zachary replied, sounding defensive.

"Then tell me," she said, fixing her gaze onto his face. "What has been on your mind over the past few days? I've noticed that you've been looking for an opportunity to ask me something. But then, you always stop at the last minute. So, go ahead and spit it out."

Zachary sighed on hearing his grandma's very accurate assumptions. She was as sharp as ever.

"I've always wanted to ask you about my parents," he said, voice lowering. "Where are they right now? How come you've never said anything about them before?"

"Oh my, Zachary," she said, sighing. "Is that what has been bugging you over the past few days? Why didn't you ask me sooner instead of continuing to worry about the issue? I would have disclosed everything since you're now old enough to hear the entire truth."

"So, where are my parents right now?" Zachary probed once again, trying his best to keep his voice stable.

He didn't want her to get sidetracked since the unsolved question of his identity had been one of the greatest regrets of his previous life. He'd met his end without ever knowing the people that had brought him into this world and left him with his grandma. But in his present life, he was determined to get some answers in order to get some closure.

"Just give me a moment, Zachary," she said, looking at him kindly. "I need to pick a few things from my room, and then we can have this talk. Understood?"

"Yes, grandma," Zachary replied. "I'll be waiting here."

"Good," she said, standing up from her seat. She then left the dining room without another word.

Zachary did his best to keep his emotions in check by focusing on his food as he waited. But, he quickly found out he'd somehow lost his appetite. He pushed his plate to the side and continued waiting for his grandma's return in silence.

Fortunately, he didn't have to wait long.

His grandma walked back into the room after a few minutes. She was carrying a small wooden chest in her hands. Without a word, she placed it on the table beside the dishes and settled back into her seat.

"What's that?" Zachary asked, looking at the chest lying on the table.

"This, Zachary, contains your father's possessions," she said, patting the chest and looking at him fondly. "At least, it includes all the possessions that I'm aware of."

Chapter 215 - A Talk With The Grandma II

"Oh," Zachary said, looking at the wooden chest. "So, where is my father now?" He probed, shifting his gaze from the chest to his grandma's face and back.

"He already left this world," his grandma said in a plain voice, not projecting any emotion. "He has already passed on."

"Oh," Zachary said, letting the information sink in.

To his surprise, he didn't feel any grief after hearing the news. He was a bit disappointed, yes, but that was all. It wasn't as bad as the time he'd heard about the death of his grandma during his previous life.

"Then my mother?" Zachary asked in a hush after another few seconds of silence.

His grandma sighed audibly on hearing that. "I never got a chance to meet the woman that should be your mother," she said, sighing again and starting to open the wooden chest.

"What do you mean?" Zachary asked as he watched her start to scan through the contents of the chest. From his position across the table, he couldn't clearly make out what was inside it. But he could guess it mainly contained papers and books — basing on the sound he heard as his grandma's hands shuffled through the contents.

"What I mean is that I've never met your biological mother," his grandma said, finally fishing out what seemed to be a few old photographs from the chest.

"Oh," Zachary said, his emotions then, in a jumbled mess.

"Your father, my son, was a budding musician who was just beginning his career before his passing," she said in a flat voice. "He'd made a breakthrough in his career by the time he was twenty and had started traveling to other African countries to promote his music."

"But, one day, he returned from a trip abroad with you in his hands," she said, her voice low but steady. "He presented you to me and said that you were his son — my grandchild. I was happy, of course."

"I asked where your mother was. The man just scratched his chin and said she was somewhere abroad. He also claimed she wasn't Congolese and promised to introduce me to her when the opportunity arose. But that was after I'd promised to help take care of you for some time."

The aged woman paused, looking away as if she was trying her best to muster her emotions. She then faced Zachary and continued, "But then, he went and got himself killed in the 1996 - 1997 war to overthrow the Mobutu regime. And that was together with my husband, your grandfather. Even up to this point, I don't understand how they got involved in that armed conflict. All I know is that it claimed their lives. But that aside, your father passed away before telling me where I could find your mom."

"Oh!" was all that Zachary could manage. He was totally at a loss for words for a few moments. But then he checked himself and decided to console his grandma before anything else.

"Grandma," he said, his voice taking on a sympathetic and concerned tone. "I'm sorry to hear all that. I can't even begin to understand what you've been going through all this time. But I want you to know that I'm always here for you."

"Thank you, Zachary," she replied, shaking her head. "But, it's okay. It has been a long time since they left this world. You have to know that by the time of their passing, you were only two years old. So, I've long gotten used to not having them around."

"What about my mother?" Zachary asked after a few moments of silence. "Is she alive?"

"That, I don't know," she replied, finally handing out the few photographs within her hands to Zachary from across the table. "What I know about her is that she might not be Congolese. She also got together with your father when he was abroad. That's her in your father's photographs."

"Oh," Zachary said, receiving them and fixing his eyes on them.

In one of the photographs, he could see a tall big man, carrying a guitar, standing together with a beautiful African lady in a party dress. They seemed happy together in the picture. So, Zachary couldn't help but wonder why his dad had had to bring him to his grandma's place instead of leaving him in the care of his mother.

"Do you have her name or any other information about her?" He asked after a while as he glanced up from the photos.

"Do you want to look for her?" His grandma countered with her own question, raising a brow.

"Maybe," Zachary said, sighing. "I only need to get some closure about the issue. If I don't find out more, I'll only remain in emotional limbo, wondering whether she's alive or dead and why she abandoned me. That will keep torturing me from the inside and deny me any peace of mind. I can't have that."

"Oh," his grandma said, a genuine soft smile outlining her face for the first time since the start of their chat. "I'm glad you're still calm even after hearing all that. It seems living alone in Europe has helped you become more mature. I'm proud of you, Zachary."

"Thank you, grandma," Zachary said, smiling back. "So, do you have any more information about her? I mean about my biological mother."

"I only know her name. And that's from the only letter from her that I managed to find in your dad's stuff. Unfortunately, there's no return address on it since it was only an informal note. Otherwise, I would have tried reaching out to her long ago."

"Where is it?" Zachary asked, trying his best to keep calm. If he could find out her name, perhaps, he could find her if he hired the right people.

"In here," his grandma replied, patting the chest beside her. "But are you sure you want to read that letter? I previously had someone read it out to me, and I noticed it was her parting message to your dad. She seemed to have penned it just after you were born. So, it may be quite painful for you to read."

"Don't worry, grandma," Zachary said, flashing her a forced smile. "It's not like I'm a ten-year-old. I can take it."

"Good," she said and then fished a folded letter pad from the chest. "Here you go." She handed it over to him from across the table.

"Thanks, grandma," he replied, receiving it.

On taking a closer look, he could immediately tell that it was from a long time ago. It was already yellowing and had many creases on its surface. But what mattered to him the most was the message inside. So, without any dilly-dallying, he unfolded the note and then started reading the letter that his biological mother had penned down in French.

"Dear Samuel,

You are fascinating as a person, and I have always envisioned a future with you. I know we could have been happy together if circumstances were different.

But I can't do this anymore.

It hurts right now, but I believe this is what's best for both of us. Please take care of our son. And don't contact me since that will create more problems on my side.

Please forgive me.

Céleste."

Zachary could not help but fall into a daze after reading the letter. He'd found out the name of his biological mother. But there wasn't any other information to help him find her location. So, he was at a loss of what to do. Moreover, it didn't feel good at all to find out that the woman who was supposed to be his mother had abandoned him, leaving him in the sole care of his other parent.

"Don't be sad, Zachary," his grandma said from across the table. "Finding your biological mother won't add anything to you. Look at you. You're already a big star in Europe, even without getting any help from her. So, cheer up and relax."

"Thanks, grandma," Zachary said, a forced smile outlining his face. "And thank you for telling me everything."

"Did you get the closure you needed?"

"To some extent."

"That's good enough," his grandma said. "Here is your dad's chest. You can keep it since it was meant to be yours in the first place. But be careful while searching for your biological mother. Make sure you don't bring any trouble to yourself. Do you get what I mean, Zachary?"

"Yes, grandma."

"Then, that's good. Go ahead and finish your dinner before you head to bed."

Chapter 216 - Resolving Concerns

Zachary spent the week following his talk with his grandma practically in a daze. Initially, he'd presumed that the news about his parents wouldn't affect him in any way. That was because he'd never gotten to know them on a personal basis.

But as the days passed, he realized that his initial assumption couldn't have been more wrong. He would often find himself wondering about his mom and dad and what could have been if he'd grown up in their care. Their images, he'd only recently seen in a few photographs, would flood his thoughts whenever he tried to focus on anything productive.

Soon, he found himself feeling depressed and started regretting why he'd opened an emotional Pandora's Box by asking his grandma to tell him about them.

He wasn't even in the mood to accompany Kristin on her visits to wildlife reserves and zoos close to Lubumbashi City. He felt guilty about that — which made him all the more depressed until he could no longer focus on training.

After a few more days of struggling with the issue, he finally couldn't take it anymore and decided to do something about it.

He couldn't allow himself to return to Norway — to playing professional football when his mind wasn't in the right place. So, he started taking the necessary steps to get some more answers about his parents.

He especially needed to find out where his missing mom was — and whether she was alive and well — before he could put the whole saga to rest. He hoped that he would have found the peace of mind to carry on with his life by then.

On a Wednesday morning, just four days to his scheduled return to Norway, he dialed the number of a private investigations firm called the International Counterintelligence Services (ICS). It was a high-profile international firm that was recommended to him by his agent, Emily, only a few days prior.

Emily had claimed that ICS employed high-profile detectives and investigators who were the best of the best across the globe. She'd mentioned that those professionals were capable of finding a missing person in any part of the world, whether alive or dead. And that it would only take a couple of years at most.

The only downside was they charged high fees for their services. However, that wasn't a concern.

He had the money, and the only thing on his mind was finding out the current status of his biological mother.

"Hello, thank you for calling the International Counterintelligence Services," a polite feminine voice said from the other end of the line as soon as the call connected. "You're now talking with Roselyn McConnell, one of the customer service staff at the firm. How can I be of help to you?"

"Hello," Zachary replied, first standing up and properly locking his bedroom door. He didn't want anyone to eavesdrop on his phone conversation.

"Hello," the feminine voice emerged from the phone placed close to his ear once more. "Are you there? How can I help you?"

"Hello," Zachary replied, settling back on his bed. "I'm Zachary, calling from Lubumbashi, Democratic Republic of Congo. A friend of mine recommended your agency to me. She told me that you're capable of helping me locate a missing person anywhere in the world. Is that true?"

"Yes, that's true," Roselyn, the customer service lady, was quick to reply in a confident tone. "You've called the right firm with the right people to help you out with your issue, Zachary. But if I may ask, how're you related to this missing person you're searching for?"

"She's my biological mother."

"Have you ever met her in person?"

"No."

"Sorry to hear that, Zachary," the customer service lady said in a seemingly compassionate tone. "But worry not. We should be able to help you locate her. But can I first have your full names, age, and place of work. We require the details to open up a file for your case."

"Okay," Zachary said. "But could you please handle my case with the utmost confidentiality? I don't want any other party finding out about it."

"You don't have to worry, Mr. Zachary," Roselyn said. "We treat the information from our clients with confidentiality. That's why the firms we manage are among the best in the world. We wouldn't have risen to such a position if we weren't doing at least that much."

"Good," Zachary said, letting out a breath. "My legal name is Zachary Bemba. I'm eighteen years old and a professional footballer, playing in the Norwegian top league."

"Oh, an eighteen-year-old professional football player!" The voice at the other end rose up a notch. Its owner seemed surprised. "If you want the utmost secrecy, such that no other party can ever get a hold of your case details, then it's better for one of our people to meet you in person. Would you prefer that, sir?"

"No, let's get this over with," Zachary replied. "I'm sure we can talk safely on my phone. It's a new line, and it isn't registered in my name."

"Then, okay," Roselyn said. "Do you have any information that we can use to track your biological mother? Or has anyone else close to you seen or come into contact with her?"

Zachary went ahead and told the lady all the information he had — which was just her first name and a few photographs of her. He also told her about the timeline for her relationship with his biological dad and then mentioned that she might not be Congolese.

"That's not a lot of information to go by, Zachary," Roselyn said after listening to him. "Is there anything else that you might have forgotten that could be of help in finding her?"

"That's the only information I have got on her," Zachary said. "Unless you want me to send you a scan of her photos right now?"

"You can send the photos by email after our phone call," she replied. "With them, we can at least start searching most databases and social media sites and see what we can get. But before that, we should talk about the consultation fees."

"Okay," Zachary said.

"For your case, we'll charge US Dollars 12,000 since it's a case that might take us to several countries. Moreover, we have limited information to go by and find your biological mother. So, our investigators will need to work extra hard if we want to find any information quickly. But you've got to understand that we might request more money later — after getting a handle on your case."

"USD 12,000 is around 100,000 Norwegian Kroner," Zachary said, trying to do the currency conversion in his head. "Is that right?"

"It's 105,000 Norwegian Kroner if we round it off," the lady replied after a few moments.

"Then, that's fine," Zachary said. "I'll wire the money using a direct bank transfer right after our phone call. But please make sure you give me a heads up in time if you wish to request more money during the investigation."

"Good, we'll do that," she said. "Thank you for choosing CSI. We'll handle your problem with the utmost care. We shall keep giving you updates every three months until we managed to solve your case. Is that okay with you, Mr. Zachary?"

"Yes, that's okay," Zachary replied. "But how long do you think it'll take for you to locate her whereabouts?"

"That, I can't tell," she replied. "We have very little information on her. So, I cannot predict the exact timeline for solving your case. But what I can promise is that we'll update you as soon as we get anything concrete."

"Okay, I understand," Zachary said.

"Okay, sir," Roselyn McConnell said. "Thank you again for choosing CSI to handle your case. We shall send confirmation and start working on your case as soon as we receive the photographs of the subject and, of course, the payment. You can get our bank details from our website before you make the transaction."

"I'll wire the money and send the photographs right away," Zachary said. "Have a good day, madam."

"Good day to you, too, Zachary," she replied and then ended the call.

After placing his phone on the bed, Zachary immediately opened his laptop and connected to the internet using his phone's tethering function. He first sent the soft copies of his biological mother to the CSI email. He then opened his bank's website and wired the consultation fees to the account listed on their website.

After receiving the confirmation that CSI had received the money a few minutes later, it felt like someone had lifted a heavy weight off his shoulders. With the help of an international private detective agency, he hoped he would find information about his mother within a short time. He was in a great mood and had even managed to regain the motivation to carry on with his strict training schedule.

Without any more dilly-dallying, he packed his gym bag and said his goodbyes to his grandma. He got into his Audi Q7 and drove out of his grandma's residence, heading towards the TP Mazembe stadium to carry out some serious training. He was determined to use the remaining days before returning to Norway to get back into perfect condition. That way, he would be in a position to continue performing at his best when the league restarted during the latter half of June.

Chapter 217 - Unexpected Advancement

The next few days passed like a vivid dream for Zachary. As his scheduled return to Norway drew closer, he became increasingly convinced that he'd made the right decision by hiring the ICS to find his biological mother. He was finally at ease since he knew professionals were working on finding his mother.

So, he returned his attention to getting his body back to tip-top shape. He followed a strict training schedule and consumed a weekly dosage of B-grade physical-conditioning-elixir. He was hard on himself and used every available minute of the next three days to practice with the intent of being fully match-fit before returning to Norway.

He would wake up early at 6:00 AM and jog between eight and fourteen miles to hone his endurance. After that, he would take breakfast and head to the TP Mazembe stadium to carry out some weight training — and go through agility drills.

In the afternoons, just after having lunch, he would practice his set-piece technique, sometimes with TP Mazembe players—if they were present. Without wasting any time, he would commence wall training to sharpen his ball control for the following hour. He would then conclude the session by running with the ball through carefully arranged cones to whet his dribbling skills.

In the evenings, just before going to bed, he would go through an hour of yoga to stretch his tired muscles. With the routine, he would also improve his flexibility plus body control. After that, he would finally retire for eight hours and resume the same schedule the following day. The days passed by quickly under the intense training. They felt like scenes from a fast-forwarded movie from Zachary's perspective.

Soon, the day before his scheduled return to Trondheim arrived. But, he still woke up early and decided to put in a few hours of running. When the clock hand pointed to six in the morning, he jumped out of bed and donned his tracksuit and sneakers.

A minute later, he rushed out of the house without waking anyone after having a light snack. Shortly, he was on the street, his strides eating meters of murram road with every passing second.

He wasn't worried that he would tire out quickly. He'd already consumed a weekly dosage of B-grade physical conditioning elixir and consequently had plenty of stamina. So, he'd decided to run to his heart's content.

Even the morning darkness didn't bother him in the slightest. He'd already put all his focus into maintaining the proper stride frequency so that his jogging was effective.

As he upped his speed and turned south — heading towards the direction of the city center, he realized he still didn't feel out of breath. He wasn't exhausted even after having run for more than seven kilometers. So, he decided to raise the intensity of the exercise up a notch by mixing in a few more routines.

For the next two kilometers, he kept on breaking into short sprints, covering hundreds of meters in only a few dozen seconds. He also slowed down occasionally to do simple exercises like leg lifting and frog jumps while still in motion. Those routines drained his stamina reserves quickly, and he soon found himself struggling for simple breath.

However, he didn't slow down one bit since he knew halting would drastically reduce the effectiveness of his entire workout. Instead, he wiped the sweat off his face with the sleeve of his tracksuit and then continuing jogging at a constant speed.

Some minutes later, the sun rose in the east, like a massive flower unfurling to shower its beauty on the city of Lubumbashi. Sunlight slowly started to fill the sky with golden radiance, fighting to illuminate every nook and cranny of the land.

Zachary's felt his spirits brighten as he watched the beautiful sunrise. He rounded a corner and started jogging back to his grandmother's residence.

For the return journey, he didn't attempt to mix in any routines into his running. He focused solely on jogging and was able to cover the entire distance in only twenty minutes.

After arriving at his grandma's place, he noticed he wasn't nearly as tired as he usually was after his previous morning runs. Despite having just completed a 14-kilometer run, he felt he still had enough stamina reserves to cover a lot more distance. It was a strange feeling. For a moment, he was tempted to run a few more kilometers to explore how much further he could go. But after deliberating for a few more seconds, he remembered he had to prepare for his trip back to Trondheim. So, he pushed the matter to the back of his mind. But that was after having convinced himself that the sensation was a result of his ideal state of mind.

"Zachary is back! Zachary is back..."

His cousins at home had already woken up when he arrived. They started shouting and clapping their hands as he rushed into the gate.

They'd warmed up to him and even started calling him big brother Zachary after he bought them a few balls, boots, and jerseys. They were always excited whenever he returned home. It seemed they always expected him to arrive with more gifts.

"How was your run, big brother Zachary?" Joshua, the oldest one, asked in Swahili with a smile.

"It was enjoyable," Zachary replied, flashing him a smile. "How is your morning? Why are you all up so early today?"

"We also want to follow big brother Zachary's example and become footballers in the future," Joshua was quick to reply as he fidgeted and scratched at his chin.

"Oh," Zachary said, sweeping a glance over them before fixing his gaze on the girl. "Even you, Lily! Do you also want to become a footballer?"

"Yes," the young girl, Lily, replied in her childish voice. "I would also like to become a footballer and drive a good car like yours."

Zachary smiled and pinched the girl's cheek lightly. "Then you guys have got to keep working hard every day," he said, glancing at the rest. "That includes running five kilometers at least every three days. Are you ready for that?"

"Yes, we are," It was Joshua, the oldest, who was quick to reply once more in an animated voice. "We have also just completed our morning run around the compound."

"Then, that's great," Zachary said, giving him a thumbs up. "Keep up the hard work, and you'll all soon mature into skilled footballers. But don't forget about school when you start training. Okay?"

"Yes, big brother," Joshua replied, smiling.

"Then, good," Zachary said before starting his stretching routine.

For the next few minutes, he focused on loosening and cooling down his muscles. He went through a textbook warming down routine that included progressive stretching of the shoulders, torso, neck, quadriceps, and hamstring.

In only a few minutes after delving into the routine, he felt his muscles relaxing and his fatigue from running fading away. But, he continued stretching for fifteen minutes to finish the session perfectly.

As soon as he'd completed the session, he headed back to his room, thinking of quickly taking a shower and going to the Planet Hollybum Hotel to check on Kristin after breakfast.

But just after he'd closed his bedroom door to undress before showering, a system notification chimed in his mind. Before he could even react, the system's translucent bluish interface manifested before him as more notification sounds went off in his mind.

"DING"

"Congratulations," the system AI intoned in its apathetic feminine voice immediately after. "The user has managed to complete a hidden system mission. For the first time, the user has advanced two of his core attributes to the S- grade."

"Which ones," Zachary asked hurriedly, feeling his heart race.

Without losing a second, he fixed his eyes on the system interface before him.

He'd been waiting for a long time for his stats to make a breakthrough and was too impatient to listen to the AI's slow emotionless voice. So, he decided to read the notifications directly from the interface and ignore the AI.

#4 new messages

CONGRATULATIONS

-> For the first time in your career, you have managed to complete a hidden system mission by upgrading two of your core attributes to the S grade. Your Stamina and Endurance physical fitness stats are now at the S- grading.

-> Mission Rewards

1) 5000 Juju-points

-> Mission Summary

*Analysis: You have managed to bypass a great bottleneck by upgrading your stamina and endurance through hard work. You have jumped over the greatest divide that separates the excellent from the ordinary players. You are well on your way to becoming a great among footballers. Congratulations.

-> Bonus Rewards

As a bonus for your hard work, you have earned a monthly dosage of an A-grade physical-conditioning-elixer. It will help you stabilize your stamina and endurance at the S-grading.

-> Remarks

Advancing the endurance and stamina attributes to the S-grading is just the beginning. You still have a long way to match the skills of any player that has ever made it to the list of players with the potential to become the G.O.A.T. So, please continue working hard.

Chapter 218 - The First S-Graded Core Attributes

"System," Zachary mumbled, trying to keep his emotions in check after reading the system notifications.
"Please show me the rest of my data."

"DING"

"Command received," the system AI replied right away. "User data coming up on the interface."

SOCCER G.O.A.T SYSTEM

SYSTEM LEVEL: 3 (7253/10000 Juju-points to level-up)

USER: Zachary Bemba

AGE: 18 years

TALENT ASSESSMENT: Grade-A

JUJU-POINTS: 7253

(Evaluation: A promising and sensational young professional player)

USER MENU

*USER STATS

*G.O.A.T MISSIONS

*SYSTEM SHOP

*SYSTEM LOTTERY

*SNOOPING TOOL

NB: Please level up the system to unlock more functions.

Zachary didn't linger on the home page for more than a couple of seconds. With a quick glance over the interface, he'd already noticed that there weren't any recent marked changes in the contents of the home menu. Only his stock of Juju-points had increased significantly since the last time he checked the menu.

So, without wasting time, he clicked on the User-Stats tab before navigating to the Physical-Fitness sub-menu.

*USER STATS

->Physical Fitness (Av. Rating: A+)

Balance and Coordination: A+

Agility: A+

Strength: A+

Stamina: S-

Endurance Points: 4943/18,000 (S-)

Zachary felt exhilarated after perusing through his physical fitness stats. Over the past couple of months, he'd started getting anxious since he'd taken long without making any marked improvements. But after two of his core attributes making a breakthrough to the S-grading, he'd finally put all the worries to rest.

At least, he could be sure he was still on the right track. He was still making improvements, and that thought brought a smile to his face.

However, he was still confused about one detail.

"System," he mumbled after settling down on his bed. "I've been getting faster and faster over the previous few months. I'm pretty sure my speed has risen by a large margin. How come my endurance and stamina attributes have made breakthroughs to the S-grading first? Why didn't my agility improve instead?"

"The stamina and endurance attributes were the user's highest-graded stats prior to obtaining the system," the AI replied, its voice sounding directly within Zachary's mind. "That implies that the user was originally talented in those two attributes. So, the user will always find it easy to upgrade those two attributes compared to the others. Besides, the physical-conditioning-elixir that the user has been consuming for over two years has helped him advance the two stats faster than expected."

"The user must also understand that upgrading the stamina and endurance stats to the S-grading first is a good thing," the AI continued in its apathetic voice. "Otherwise, the user would lack the necessary stamina reserves to support the high rate of consumption while using the S-graded agility or skills."

"Oh," Zachary said, a light bulb going on in his head after hearing the AI's explanation.

He'd not considered that the higher the grading of his attributes or skills, the more stamina they would need as fuel. So, for instance, if he'd upgraded his agility to the S-grading first, he would, of course, get

faster with the ball. But he would also find it hard to sustain his top speed for extended periods of time since he would be burning through his endurance faster.

"I understand," he mumbled, letting out a breath and closing the system interface. He decided to consider using the A-graded physical-conditioning-elixir only after using up his current dosage of the B-graded one.

His mind was at ease as he headed to the bathroom. He quickly washed up and donned a fresh tracksuit. A few minutes later, he finished eating his breakfast and said his goodbyes to his grandma. Without dilly-dallying, he got into his Audi Q7 and drove to the Planet Hollybum Hotel to check on Kristin.

"Long time no see, Zachary," Kristin said as soon as he'd settled into a chair opposite hers in the Planet Hollybum Hotel's restaurant. She was in the middle of taking her breakfast and seemed to be in a good mood — basing on the smile that was framing her face. "How have you been?" She asked, placing her cup on the table.

"I'm fine, Kristin," Zachary replied, flashing her a smile. "You seem quite happy. What have you been up to these past few days that has lightened your mood?"

Kristin's mouth curved upwards into a genuine smile at the corners. "I've visited the Lubumbashi zoo, the TP Mazembe stadium, and even traveled to the outskirts of Katanga to look at the wildlife."

"You even moved to the outskirts of Katanga!"

"Yes. I hired a reputable tour company recommended by my grandpa to take me around the place. So, I've already hiked in the wild on several occasions. I've also done some mountain climbing and experienced a lot more fun things. But my trip here would have been a tad bit more enjoyable if my travel companion had taken the time to check on me — maybe once or twice over the past couple of weeks."

Zachary sighed, shaking his head on hearing her indirect verbal jab. "Sorry, Kristin," he said. "I had quite a lot on my plate back at home. I didn't even get enough time to complete the entire training schedule that I'd planned for this vacation."

"Oh," Kristin said, creasing a brow. She looked genuinely concerned. "What happened? Is everything okay at home?"

"A week ago, my mind wasn't in the right place," Zachary replied. "But I'm now well and ready to head back to Trondheim and play football."

"Then, that's good, Zachary," she replied, leaning back into her seat and holding his gaze. "I'm glad you're now okay."

"You know," she continued, "Many of my friends have assured me I'm quite a good listener. So, if you have anything that you want to unburden from your mind, you can talk to me, and I'll listen."

"Thanks, Kristin," Zachary replied, smiling at her. "That means a lot. But I've already managed to handle what was bugging me. I'm fine now."

"That puts my heart at ease, Zachary," she said. "So, is the plan still the same? Are we traveling back to Trondheim tomorrow? Or should we stay here in Lubumbashi for a few more days?"

"You seem to be enjoying yourself here," Zachary remarked.

"As I said, I'm not complaining. The sights around here are quite spectacular. I would love to spend some more time here."

Chapter 219 - A Prospective Publicity Secretary

"Sorry, but we can't spend any more days here," Zachary said, shaking his head. "The coach needs me back for official team training on Monday, June 17th. We're commencing with preparations for the match against Str?msgodset IF then."

"Oh, Str?msgodset, the table leaders," Kristin said, her voice rising slightly in excitement. "Do you have the confidence to destroy them? As long as we beat them, we'll surpass them and top the table since they're only one point ahead of us."

"That I know," Zachary said, sighing. "I'm sure we'll be able to score goals during the match. We have Nicki, Borek, Tarik, and John Chibuike upfront. They've all been on form and can score at any time."

"Please don't forget to put yourself on that list," Kristin chipped in. "For the past few matches, you've always been the playmaker on the team. That's why we've managed to go seven matches unbeaten over the past month."

"Okay, okay, and myself, Zachary Bemba," he said, deepening his voice and grinning.

Kristin chuckled at that.

"So, as I was saying," Zachary continued, "We have very high chances of scoring during the game against Strømsgodset. But what I'm not sure about is whether we can avoid conceding."

"You do have a point there. Over the past few months, you guys have been conceding many goals despite winning matches. I wonder what's wrong!"

"You didn't hear this from me, and you shouldn't repeat it to another soul," Zachary said, leaning forward and lowering his voice. "I think our defenders are usually fatigued since they play in every match — whether on the weekend or during midweek. That's why they usually lose their stamina by the 50th minute. And that's when we start conceding goals."

"Oh, that might be the case, indeed," Kristin said, nodding pensively. "It seems there's a shortage of fit defenders on the first team. But the question is: what is Coach Johansen doing about it?"

"I'm not sure," Zachary said, sighing. "But maybe, he'll bring in another defender during the upcoming mid-season transfer window. As long as two more central defenders arrive, our line-up will become stronger and more balanced."

"Let's hope the management will be cooperative and let him sign the defenders," Kristin said, sighing. "They're usually very reluctant to spend money, especially in the middle of the season. But that aside, how did DR Congo perform during the qualifiers?"

Zachary sighed on hearing the question. "They drew 0:0 against Libya. They'll face Cameroon on Sunday evening — that's tomorrow but one. By then, we should already be back in Trondheim."

"I'm still surprised, though, that they didn't call you for national duty," Kristin remarked after sipping on her coffee. "With you on the squad, they would, at the very least, have gotten a goal. And that would have won them the match."

"I can't totally blame them," Zachary said. "I've only been playing for a month. Not many people in Africa and even the rest of Europe know about me."

"Oh, that's too bad," Kristin said, shaking her head. "Maybe, you should hire me as your publicity secretary to help you raise your popularity. I'm sure a lot of people around the world will get to know about Zachary Bemba by the end of this year if I'm managing your publicity."

"Are you serious?" Zachary asked, raising a brow. "Or are you simply joking? You should know that being a publicity secretary can be quite taxing at times. You've got to manage my social media accounts, edit and post my match videos online, and organize my interviews, among other things. So, let me ask again: are you serious, Kristin?"

"Why would I joke about something so serious, Zachary?" She countered with her own question, matching his gaze. "If you need someone to manage your publicity for some time, I can help you out until you get a professional. It'll be good practice for me since I intend to work in the sports industry."

"Moreover, I'm good with social media, photography, and video editing," she continued in a confident tone. "So, I'll be able to update your neglected Twitter account with amazing posts such as well-edited videos and photographs — to get you more followers. I'll also try to manage your media presence on several other platforms so that I can raise your popularity within a short time."

"Oh," Zachary said, surprised. "You can even edit videos?"

"Yes, I'm quite good with Blender. I'll be able to edit out some good clips from your match videos to come up with video posts."

"You're quite skilled, Kristin," Zachary said, sighing. "How much would you be willing to work for every month? That's, of course, if I decide to hire you after discussing with my agent."

"I would say 2000 NOK," she said, watching his reaction very intently. "But that's too little. Isn't it? I'll charge 4000, no 5000 Norwegian Kroner to manage your publicity per month. I hope that isn't too costly, Zachary?" She held his gaze like she was searching for the correct answer within his eyes.

Zachary almost laughed on seeing her fidget with setting the price. But he controlled himself and deliberated about the issue for a few moments before giving a reply.

"Let's do it like this," he said. "I will get my agent to draw up a three-month contract for you as my publicity secretary. For those three months, you'll be under probation. But you'll still earn 5000 NOK per month for the entire duration of the contract."

"If you perform your duties well within that period, and also manage to convince my agent, I'll get her to draw up another contract for you — covering a period of one year. We can even think of doubling your wage then. Can that work for you, Kristin?"

"Yes, that's excellent," Kristin replied excitedly. "You won't be disappointed."

"Then that's good," Zachary said, observing her from across the table. "I'll call my agent today evening. We should have a contract for you ready by next week."

"That's perfect," Kristin said, beaming. "In the meantime, should I start working on that Twitter account of yours? You've abandoned it for quite a long time!"

"No need to rush, Kristin," he replied. "For now, you need to prepare for our trip back tomorrow. We're departing at 8:00 PM from Lubumbashi Airport tomorrow and should be in Trondheim the day after — on Sunday morning."

"Okay, then," Kristin said, still smiling. "I'll try to complete all my shopping today so that I'm ready to travel by tomorrow evening."

"Good, then I'll meet you tomorrow in the afternoon," Zachary said, standing up from his seat. "We can then set off to the airport together."

"That sounds like a plan," Kristin replied, creasing a brow. "But why are you in such a hurry to leave? At least have some coffee before you set off. I'm buying, so you shouldn't say no."

"We need to take a rain check on that, Kristin," Zachary said, shaking his head. "I've got to visit a lot of people in Lubumbashi before I depart. So, I need to run and start moving all over the place. But don't worry. I'll make it up to you by taking you for Pizza at Tyholt when we're back in Trondheim. Okay?"

"That's okay," Kristin said, beaming once again. "But, I'll constantly be on your case if you dare forget."

"I won't forget."

"You better not."

"I won't, Kristin. See you tomorrow."

"Okay."

Chapter 220 - Back To Trondheim

The evening of the following day, Zachary and Kristin flew back to Trondheim as planned. There were no unexpected incidents on their trip back. So they managed to arrive safely at V?rnes Airport the following morning.

They went through airport procedures quickly with the intent of heading back home as soon as possible. They both wanted to have some hours of proper rest after the long journey.

However, just as they were on their way to the baggage claim area, a few passionate Rosenborg fans recognized Zachary. He ended up signing several autographs and taking the occasional selfie with the fans before managing to escape and collect his luggage.

But since he didn't want to get entangled by any more fans, he donned an oversized cap and pulled its visor down to cover part of his face as he exited the airport.

"Good sweet, Trondheim," Kristin said with a sigh as they were pulling their cases towards one of the parking spaces. "You're so popular here, unlike in Lubumbashi, where no one could recognize you. It's good you took the time to sign autographs for those fans. It shows that you care about them, and that'll lift your public image gradually."

"Oh," Zachary said, inclining his head to glance at her. "I can see that you're already in publicity secretary mode. By the way, I talked to my agent yesterday morning before we departed from Lubumbashi. She'll be in Trondheim next week to follow up on another deal of mine. Maybe, you could meet her then and finalize your contract details."

"That's okay with me," Kristin said with a smile. "I'll be spending a lot of time in my apartment until I commence my internship with Rosenborg next month. So, I'll surely be available to meet her next week."

"That's perfect then," Zachary said as they walked into the parking spaces for the taxi cabs for hire. "I'll confirm the plan with her when I talk to her later. You can start working on the Twitter account then."

"Do I need to prepare anything in particular?" Kristin queried, giving him a sideways glance.

"No," he replied, shaking his head. "Just make sure you're not late when meeting her. If she needs anything, she'll request you to prepare it during the meeting."

"Okay."

A soft smile outlined Kristin's face as she watched Zachary help her carry her suitcases and arrange them properly in the boot of the hired taxi cab. She was in a good mood. The trip to Lubumbashi had been a productive one.

Aside from visiting the attractions there, she'd gotten the opportunity to work as Zachary's publicity secretary. She was eager to start working since she was a hundred percent certain that he would turn into a big star in the future. Working for him would open more doors and get her more contacts in the sports industry.

Besides, her new job would enable her to spend more quality time with him — and that was a possibility that made her smile on the inside. But then she checked herself a moment later.

'What am I thinking?' she wondered, shaking her head. 'When did I become so desperate and hopeless?'

"What's the matter?" She heard Zachary ask from beside her. He'd finished arranging all the suitcases in the boot and was watching her face intently.

Kristin could see that he was genuinely concerned. It seemed he was still trying to make up for neglecting her for weeks when they were in Lubumbashi together. However, a moment later, she recalled seeing him escort a beauty from his apartment and banished the thought from her mind.

"Is everything okay?" He asked again, looking all worried and imposing. "Why are you shaking your head like you're facing some dilemma? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," she replied, flashing him a smile. "Don't mind me."

"Oh," he said, raising a brow. He didn't seem convinced.

"I just recalled a few artifacts that I forgot to buy in Lubumbashi since I was in a hurry," she lied, still maintaining a smile. "I was just regretting missing out on them a moment ago."

"Oh," Zachary said, nodding. "Maybe, I can tell a friend to buy them and send them here—to Trondheim if you wish."

"That's not necessary, Zachary," she said, still maintaining a smile. "But thanks anyway. Shouldn't we get into the taxi now and head home? We seem to be delaying the driver."

"Okay," Zachary replied, nodding.

Zachary returned all his focus to training for the next few days after his return to Trondheim. He was fully intent on stabilizing his endurance and stamina attributes at the S-grading before the Strømsgodset match. That would leave him in tip-top shape and set him up for a good performance against the table leaders.

He even consumed the weekly dosage of the A-graded physical conditioning elixir in addition to exercising like a maniac. His workout routine involved running about eight kilometers and then going through an hour of weight training at the Lerkendal gym before attending the team's training sessions. During the team sessions, he would run laps around the stadium, go through cone drills, and practice shooting and passing under the guidance of the coaches.

The days flew by quickly, and soon it was the evening before the match against Strømsgodset IF.

Zachary headed to the Rosenborg tactics room to listen to Coach Johansen's pre-match tactical briefing after training. He was eager to take part in an official match again after spending almost a month without playing.

"Good evening, everyone," Coach Johansen said as soon as the players had settled down in their seats.

"Good evening, coach," the players replied, more or less in unison.

"Let's get right to business," he said, glancing around. "Tomorrow, in the evening, we're facing Strømsgodset IF, the current table leaders. They are only a point ahead of us. So, if we win, we'll surpass them and top the table. This is a match we must win. Are we together, guys?"

"Yes, coach."

"Good," Coach Johansen said, half-smiling. "To make sure we don't falter and concede needless goals tomorrow, I've adjusted the line-up a bit to bolster our defense. We'll utilize a 4-2-3-1 formation with two double pivots to boost our defensive line. But, before I delve further into the tactics, let me start by announcing the line-up."

"Daniel Rønlund will be our goalkeeper for this match," he continued, moving towards the tactics board and starting to draw the formation. "In defense, we'll have Mikael Dorsin, Stefan Strandberg, Verner

Rønning, and Cristian Gamboa. Our two double pivots in the 4-2-3-1 formation will be Mike Jensen and Jonas Svensson. Zachary Bemba will play in front of them as our only attacking midfielder. Tarik Elyounoussi and Tobias Mikkelsen will play in the left and right wings, respectively. And finally, Nicki Nielsen will play as our lone striker."

"Moving on," the coach said, stepping away from the tactics board after drawing the entire line-up. "On the bench, we'll have Lund Hansen, Mix Diskerud, Ole Selnes, Fredrik Midtsj?, Daniel Berntsen, Borek Dockal, and John Chibuike. That is it for the line-up."

"Any questions?" He asked, sweeping his gaze across the entire room. But none of the players raised an arm.

"Okay," he said after a while, moving back towards the tactics board. "Let's move on to the game plan and tactics. As I already said, we'll mainly be defensive-minded during the game against the table leaders tomorrow. Our two double pivots will have to do their best to protect our defense from aerial balls while also checking the runs of Strømsgodset players through the middle."

"Additionally, our two wingers will have to constantly fall back to support the back whenever we lose possession. With such an arrangement, I believe that we'll be able to avoid conceding. That is if every player plays out his role perfectly. Are we together, guys?"

"Yes, coach."

"Good," Coach Johansen said, nodding. "To score, we'll mainly depend on counterattacks. We'll not try to dominate possession like we usually do tomorrow. Instead, we'll sit back and weather their attacks while awaiting an opportunity. If we manage to win the ball — pah, pah." He clapped his hands, glancing around.

"We immediately hit them on the counter — without giving them a chance to react," he continued. "For that tactic to work, we'll need the wingers and the attacking midfielder to be very creative and link up well while on the counter. Are we together, Zachary, Tarik, and Tobias?"

"Yes, coach," Zachary replied along with the other two wingers.

"Zachary," the coach continued after a while, glancing at him. "You'll be playing a free role tomorrow. It'll be solely up to you to decide where you're most needed on the pitch and then move there. You have got to keep on your toes so as to make sure that you don't miss out on any opportunities while also anticipating the danger posed by the opponents. Are we together, Zachary?"

"Yes, coach," he replied, nodding.

"Good," the coach intoned, still looking at him. "Since we're relying on counterattacks, you'll have to constantly run back and forth between the two halves throughout the entire game. That's because you'll be the main man linking the defense to both the wings and the attack. But don't worry. If you get tired, John or Borek will be available to take over your position. You only have to make sure that you create some goal-scoring opportunities for us before you tire yourself out. Are we together?"

"Coach, I understand," Zachary replied, matching the coach's gaze. "But I'm sure that I won't tire myself before the match ends. I'm very confident about that."

"Oh," Coach Johansen said, seemingly surprised by his confidence. "I was only making a deduction based on the amount of work you'll have to do in the first half. Mounting counterattacks over and over again while also defending at times is likely to consume your stamina. But, of course, it's my wish that you manage to complete the match without depleting your stamina, Zachary."

"I will, coach," Zachary said confidently once again. He'd just upgraded his stamina and endurance to the S-grading. So, he was almost certain that he wouldn't tire himself out before the 90 minutes of the game elapsed.

"Then, I'll look forward to your performance, Zachary," the coach said, smiling. "But you've got to remember that there's no pressure. As long as you play your role perfectly, even if it's for just the first half, that'll be enough. Do you understand what I mean, Zachary?"

"I understand, coach."

"Good," the coach said, finally turning away. He continued discussing the game plan while occasionally pointing out the individual roles of different players. He spoke in great detail and only released the squad when it was close to nine in the evening.

After the pre-match tactical briefing, Zachary said his goodbyes to his teammates and got into his R8 GT. He cruised at a leisurely speed, heading home to rest for the night. All the while, a soft smile outlined his face. He was very pleased with the role that the coach had assigned him. He hoped the night would pass quickly.