

Football 561

Chapter 561 Madam Koi Koi

The Jeep surged into the narrow path, branches clawing at us from both sides, scraping against the metal with the shrieks of nails on a chalkboard. Each violent jolt threatened to toss me from the cargo bay as I clung desperately to the rusted railing, bracing my feet on a crate that bounced and skidded around beneath me.

Behind us, the jungle erupted into a symphony of gunfire, the heavy percussion of automatic weapons punctuated by sharp, erratic bursts. Through the chaos, I glimpsed Sir Michle huddled low in the passenger seat, his tailored suit now covered in sweat and grime, his face pale with terror. His reaction made me wonder how a man who can make his fortune from the blood of innocents could be so weak-willed.

Heck, I've seen kids barely ten clutch an AK and gun down grown men in desperation. "Can't you savages drive straight?!" Michle spat, voice cracking with panic.

"Unless you want me to crash into a tree, shut up!" Kwame barked back, his voice oddly steady for a thirteen-year-old facing death head-on.

Kosongo's voice erupted from the radio clipped to Kwame's vest, urgent and commanding. "We're two clicks from Mwamba village, it should be abandoned—hold it together!"

Following his voice, Kwame gripped the steering wheel, narrowly avoiding a tree as he turned towards the south. Looking back at the cars that were still following, I slid open one of the crates, revealing a beast. A black, slightly used M249, quickly chambering one of the prepared ammo dryms, I propped it up on the crate in front of me.

I could have sworn I saw the driver in the leading pursuer curse upon seeing what I had set up. Not caring, though I just squeezed the trigger, spraying a volley of bullets, aiming at their engines and tires. The recoil slammed violently into my shoulder, each burst of fire rattling through my bones.

Brass shells spat from the gun, tumbling into the cargo bed with a musical chime. My vision narrowed into a tight tunnel, adrenaline flooding my veins as the muzzle flash illuminated the chaos behind us. The lead jeep pursuing us swerved sharply, the front tires shredded by my assault.

It lurched sideways, smashing into a fallen log and flipping violently through the air, hurling men screaming into the dense brush. Two more vehicles swerved wildly to avoid collision, one skidding off the path into a deep ditch, metal groaning in protest. "Nice shot, brother!" Kwame shouted over the growl of our engine and the ringing in my ears.

The jungle track grew tighter, the long branches slapping the side of my face, cutting my skin with shallow, stinging slashes. The path twisted and turned, making aiming impossible as the pursuing vehicles faded further behind. Things suddenly became quiet as the last of the pursuers crashed into a tree after driving into a ditch.

Already out of ammo, I watched the car lurch into the air like a cliché Hollywood scene, spinning in the air like a corkscrew. There wasn't a slow-motion scene as the laws of nature took over, sending the car crashing into a tree and ripping it apart. Kwame didn't stop driving until we finally burst free from the oppressive clutch of the jungle and into a dusty clearing, the sparse cluster of derelict buildings looming in the distance.

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[Hours later]

The fire crackled softly at our feet, its glow flickering dimly against the crumbling stone walls of the old schoolhouse. Shadows stretched long and thin, dancing eerily along cracked blackboards and overturned desks. Bullet holes pocked the walls, and faded posters— reminders of a forgotten past—clung desperately to the stone, peeling and yellowed with time.

Kosongo leaned against the wall, his assault rifle close by, eyes sharp and vigilant despite his exhaustion. Abu and Kwame sat quietly nearby, ration packets opened and half-eaten, their faces smudged with dirt and weariness. They sat near the fire, warming themselves as they listened to the Michles' complaints and Kosongos' attempts to placate him.

"I didn't sign up for this incompetence," he hissed, his voice thick with irritation. "Kofi promised me capable men, not frightened children. If you little savages had done your job properly—"

"Kosongo shut him up before he attracts what's out there," I said as I gazed out of the broken window, more afraid of the creatures that now called this place home than whether our pursuers were still chasing us.

"Brat, whom do you think you're talking to?" Sir Michle hissed, brushing off the dust on his coat in frustration.

Kosongo's sharp voice cut through the tension, eyes blazing fiercely as he turned to Michle. "He's right. Keep your voice down or whatever's lurking in this godforsaken place will have you for dinner."

Michle sneered bitterly, glaring daggers at me before huffing in annoyance and leaning back against the wall. "Insolent little—"

"Enough," Kosongo growled, silencing the man with a fierce stare. "Rest, Sir Michle. Tomorrow we move again."

I turned away, settling at the corner just a few meters from the entryway. Huddling tight, I closed my eyes to conserve energy with a light nap rather than dealing with that entitled bastard. I figured that since I didn't plan on ever returning to camp, I should enjoy one last nap to end this miserable existence.

"You know I never would have pegged the great Rakim Rex as a martyr," A voice whispered clearly in my ear, shocking the drowsiness out of me. "I guess even you don't have a perfect solution for every situation."

My heart jolted, my head snapping to the side. There sat a slightly tanned white boy dressed in a pair of navy-blue Saint Andrews military boarding school uniform, pristine despite our surroundings. His Black mohawk, butchered to a clean buzz, a cocky smirk tugged at his lips as he watched me with an amused gaze.

"Not you again, I already know you're not real, so you can stop with the theatrics?" I muttered under my breath, clenching my eyes shut briefly, willing him away. Liam didn't flinch, not minding my displeasure. Didn't vanish either. If anything, his smirk deepened.

"Yeah, yeah," he said, casually flicking a bit of lint off his blazer. "Not real, figment of your trauma-addled imagination, blah blah. Still, I'm all you've got right now, and we both know you can't get shit done without a pep talk."

I didn't answer and merely gazed into his blue eyes, trying to understand what he was getting at. He had been the only apparition that had been appearing before me like a recurring bad dream. At first, I was happy to see him, but he is far more sarcastic than I remember him being.

"Thought so." He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, eyes narrowing slightly. "You really think you can do it? You'll rot in this shithole if you don't, so I guess you don't have a choice. With that lizard in a suit barking orders like he's not the reason we're neck-deep in this mess?"

"There is no we, you're not real," I hissed back, making sure to keep my voice low as I spoke through my sleeve.

"Oh, that really hurt my feelings, and here I thought we were like brothers," Liam said, tapping his temple. "You know, like Scar and Mufasa."

"Wow, you do know that Mufasa is the bad guy in that story?" I replied in half disbelief, slightly wondering what point he was trying to make. "Still, it's not my fault you moved back to Scotland, it's also not my fault you decided to get yourself shipped off, so spare me the pity party, I'm kinda busy, you know."

"NO! You do not get to turn your back on me, Rakim Rex. You owe me that much," he exclaimed, the relaxed expression completely disappearing from his visage as he jumped up from the boulder he was sitting on.

"Naw fam, I don't. You are not real, bro." I exclaimed, my voice rising much louder than before, even startling the monkey in the suit. "And it's Rakim Eze over here."

"What the F\$%k is wrong with that boy? Is he talking to himself?" Sir Michle hissed in annoyance, shooting a glare at Kosongo.

Kwame, hearing his exclamation, jumped up from his sleeping position, looking more frightened than he was. "It's Madam Koi Koi." All the colour seemed to drain from his face as he subconsciously reached for his gun.

"Who is Madam Koi Koi?" Ade asked, also visibly frightened, but unlike the younger Kwame, he didn't immediately reach for his gun.

"The elder said she was..."

Chapter 562 Abu S-Grade Instigator

"The elder said she was a schoolteacher," Kwame whispered, his voice trembling as he scanned the shadows dancing on the far wall. "They said she used to wear red heels—click-clack, click-clack—you'd hear them echo down the hallway right before someone disappeared. Some say she was killed by soldiers, others say by her students... but everyone agrees on one thing—when you hear those heels, it means she's coming for you."

He trailed off, his wide eyes darting toward the dark corridor that led deeper into the old schoolhouse.

"Cut that superstitious nonsense," Kosongo snapped, though even his voice carried an edge now. "There are no ghosts in this place, only monsters with guns and hunger."

Kwame didn't look convinced. Neither did Ade, who'd shifted closer to the fire without a word, his eyes locked on the corridor as if daring it to blink first. "She is no ghost, oh no, she is far worse as every place she roams becomes deserted, devoid of the laughter of children."

Sir Michle scoffed at the chatter, unwilling to be creeped out by a bunch of children. "click-clack, click-clack." Just then, they heard a peculiar noise outside the corridor that seemed to get closer by the second. The sound echoed through the schoolhouse like a hammer tapping on the inside of their skulls.

Everyone froze, no one daring to move, as even Rakim and the Imagery Liam turned to face the hallway. Kwame's eyes went wide, the fire casting a flickering orange glow across his face, which now glistened with sweat despite the night air. He didn't dare to blink, didn't breathe.

(Click-clack.) The second it hit the floor again—closer now—Kwame raised his rifle without hesitation, aiming it toward the shadowed hallway. "Lower your weapon," Kosongo said firmly, but even he was getting to his feet, shoulders taut, hand resting on the grip of his own rifle.

"No, no, no, no," Kwame muttered under his breath, voice cracked with dread. "She's real. I heard this sound before... before my older cousin vanished outside a school just like this. They found his shoes and nothing else."

"Relax," I said, trying to keep my voice calm, though I felt the chill too. "It's probably just an echo. A pipe is dripping water. Something rational."

(Click-clack.) Closer still. The noise reverberated with no clear source, as if the walls themselves had decided to play a cruel joke on us. Liam tilted his head, amused. "You sure it's just a pipe, Rakim? Doesn't this remind you of Toby's school shooting?"

The mention of the shooting immediately caused Rakim to glare his way, but Liam merely clutched the back of his head in a carefree manner. "Could be scavengers," Kosongo muttered, but there was no real

conviction in his tone. He gestured to Abu, who slowly moved toward one of the broken windows, peering out through the jagged glass into the hallway.

He was unable to see anything, though, causing him to sigh in relief. "There is nothing out here," Abu whispered, but a second later, the same (Click-clack. Click-clack.) noise resounded as a long shadow appeared outside the door.

The moon's light seemed to illuminate the shadow, making it exceptionally long with black tentacles all over its body. The silence in the room was loud, so thick it felt like the walls were holding their breath. Even the fire popped once and went quiet, the embers sinking low. Then, just as suddenly, Sir Michle bumped into an old wooden desk, toppling it over with a thunderous crash.

Everyone jumped, even whatever was outside. Kwame let out a sharp cry and pulled the trigger. The rifle exploded with sound, muzzle flashes lighting up the hallway just outside the entryway like strobe lights in a haunted house. (RATATATATAT) The bullets tore through plaster and brick, ricocheting off stone. Dust and shards rained down as screams and curses erupted around the fire.

"Cease fire!" Kosongo barked, grabbing the barrel and jerking it upward, but Kwame was already shaking, wide-eyed, his weapon clattering from his hands to the floor.

Sir Michle was halfway to the opposite corner of the room, crouching low behind a pile of broken chairs. "You maniacs! You'll bring the whole damn roof down!"

"What did you see?!" Kosongo snapped.



Kwame just shook his head, breath stuttering. "It was—her silhouette. I swear. In the red heels. And eyes. White. Glowing."

No one spoke, not because we believed it, but because none of us could say we didn't hear it too. "You know," Liam said beside me, utterly calm in his blazer like this was all part of the plan, "this would be the perfect time for the hero to stand up and say something brave. Something leader-like."

Ignoring him, I watched as Abu carefully sneaked to the door under everyone's cautious gaze. He slowly peeked around the entryway, scanning the area that was now riddled with bullet holes. He seemed shocked for a moment before he dared to walk out and face whatever it was.

He disappeared to the left, unsettling everyone in the room, and in the next second, a loud, horrified shriek resounded. "ARGHH," Abu exclaimed, causing everyone to jump to their feet in shock, clutching their weapons.

Abu fell backwards, appearing in full view of everyone who was craning their necks to see what was troubling him. Blood could be seen staining his sleeves with some splattered on his face, putting everyone on edge as he twisted with groans on the floor, overwhelmed by pain. "Puhhaha, you should see your faces," he exclaimed just as loudly, as he suddenly stopped, sitting up on the ground, as if nothing had happened.

"If you could've seen yourselves—Kwame's eyes were bugging out like a cartoon!" Abu wheezed through his laughter, gripping his stomach.

Kosongo's glare could've cut steel. "You think this is funny?" he growled, stepping forward. "You think pretending to be attacked when we're being hunted, when anything out there could've heard—"

"Yeah, yeah, the only thing hunting us is this rat," he interrupted his nagging, holding up a long rat tail. "Well, what's left of it?"

(broohg,) Sirmichle immediately barfed out the contents of his stomach as he saw the grotesque mess of asking and body organs hanging at the end of the rat tail. "Kwame, the only thing you hit was Ratatui."

"Hahaha, you almost pissed your pants over a rat," Liam exclaimed, holding his stomach in laughter as he floated around Rakim.

Kwame glared at Abu, cheeks burning with embarrassment as he snatched his rifle from the floor. "Next time you scream like that, I'm shooting first and asking questions never," he muttered, avoiding everyone's gaze.

Abu only laughed harder, slapping his knee. "Man, you can never act tough in front of me again."

"You're an idiot," Kosongo snapped. "And a lucky one. If you'd done that ten clicks closer to enemy territory, we'd be dead."

"We're all gonna die young anyway, so what's the big deal?" Abu replied in a much more sombre tone, the amusement gone from his facial features, as he glared at Kosongo. "You know I've been wondering for a while why you're trying to cosy up to Kofi? The last guy got killed over a mistake that was all his fault."

The atmosphere suddenly turned dangerous as Abu glared at Sir Michle, who was gulping water, trying to wash away the taste of vomit. Kosongo didn't respond right away as he scanned the other two boys, who were now paying attention, subconsciously clutching their guns. "We all have a role to play, just do yours."

"You're right, Ko, let's all remember to stick to our roles. Ade already died for this guy, don't expect any heroics for this guy's sake." Abu replied, facing the older boy without a hint of fear as he walked towards him. "You know, I always thought that Omar's death was a little suspicious, you were the last with him, care to comment?"

Kosongo's jaw flexed, his eyes narrowing as he stepped forward, the air between them thick with tension. The fire cast their shadows, illuminating their standoff as they stood just a meter apart. "That's enough," Kosongo said, voice low but edged with steel. "You don't get to question my orders, Kofi put me in charge. You start tossing blame about Omar without proof—next time, I'll put two rounds in your chest and there won't be any debate that Kosongo did it."

Abu didn't flinch despite having to look up at the latter. "Who's blaming you? Im just making conversation giving us something to think about. You they say about an idle mind? Don't want any of the two getting any ideas."

He nonchalantly responded, brushing past the older boy as he walked towards where he had set up his sleeping area. Without a care at the awkward situation he had created he used his water pouch to clean the rat blood for his face and sat down to rest. Kosong tried to play it off as if he had everything under control, but the suspicious glare Kwame gave him unsettled him.

That's without mentioning the green cat-like eyes of Rakim that locked onto him like a tiger that had just realised an antelope was chilling within its midst.

"Damn," Liam whispered beside me, stretching lazily as if he were lying on a beach chair rather than sitting on a stone slab in a haunted schoolhouse in the middle of a warzone. "The ploy thickens. You've got betrayal, paranoia, ghost stories, rat guts—just missing a love triangle and we've got ourselves a Netflix deal."

I didn't answer. My eyes were still on Kosongo, who had barely moved since Abu lay down. But they could all see it in his reaction, the paranoid way his fingers ghosted near his rifle out of habit. Control was slipping, and he was on the edge of panicking affirming that what Abu insinuated was probably true.

Liam's chuckle grated on my nerves. "What's the plan, Rex? You're gonna keep sitting there like a movie extra while the camp unravels around you?"

I exhaled slowly, resting my head against the cold stone wall behind me. "You really think any of them would follow me? Plus what do I care if it all implodes, didn't you hear Abu our days are numbered over here" I whispered, mostly to myself.

Liam shrugged. "They followed you before, I followed you before. When we were twelve, you convinced six kids to skip sportsday drill and raid the mess hall at Red Oak, remember? We got caught, but those cookies never tasted so good."

"Don't worry bro things are already in motion," I muttered.

Chapter 563 563 Stayin' Alive

[Date: 28 April 2020 | Lockdown Week 5 | Time: 12:44 AM | Location: Freud & Croft Private Memorial Hospital ]

In the left wing of the 10th floor, a soft humming could be heard coming from one of the quarantined rooms of the private wings. See-through curtains were used to cordain off the entryways instead of door handles, which were deemed an even bigger germ hazard than shaking hands. Outside, doctors in white hazmat suits could be seen moving from room to room, treating the most afflicted patients.

Despite the controlled panic outside, a peach-blond woman dressed in a hospital gown could be seen within room 1023. Unlike others who acted like vampires meeting the sun at the slightest contact with another human being, she actively held the hand of the unconscious figure on the bed. She was probably the only person in the hospital who dared to do so without worry, given that she had been in the bed next to him, suffering the same as he did just a day ago.

"You know what this is no longer funny, Babe," She whispered, half choked, doing her best to hold back another bout of tears. "If you wanted to get my attention, this is a shitty way to do it."

"Whom am I kidding, when have you ever struggled in getting my attention?" She reproached herself, whipping off a tear that had just escaped her eyes. "You know, you probably don't know this, but I beffed with quite a few girls because of you."

"What don't believe me, just ask yourself what happened to that little vixen, one day she was throwing herself at you and the next she found god." She chuckled lightly as if remembering something funny. "No, I did not fight her, I simply reminded her, staunchly Christian grandma, that her granddaughter might be a hoe. Honestly, she would have found out on her own down the road."

"Yeah, I know I should apologise to her, and I will. No one deserves to be shipped off to an all-girls school over." She said as if the unconscious Rakim had just chided her. "A girl will get jealous if her man keeps talking about another girl, you know."

"It doesn't matter if I brought her, just stop thinking about her," she complained with a light point, adjusting the clear mask in front of her face.

"On another note, your mom called again today, you, of course, were still having your beauty nap, but she wanted me to say hello and she loves you." She half whispered, her tone noticeably dropping as she gazed at his serene figure. His muscular chest rose up and down in a steady rhythm, looking as healthy as ever, if one ignored the constant beat of the heart monitor. "They're still unable to travel, and I think that fact is driving her worries crazy."

"You probably don't want to hear this, but your dad, I mean your biological one, has been a heaven-sent." She explained with a light smile. "Not sure how, but when we woke up, we had been moved from the Cologne public hospital to this place."

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What she said was true, as the two had barely been conscious when the paramedics had found them at their home. They had fallen sick in succession a week ago on the 14th, with May showing symptoms first. Rakim showed fever-like symptoms a day later, and to be safe, they had isolated themselves in different rooms, maintaining distance from one another, even at dinner.

Being alone in the house made things easy as they could just keep far enough apart during the day. It worked well as they didn't get bored since their daily activity didn't change much, except for the cutback on their exercises. However, on Day Three, May started to feel increasingly unwell, unable to keep even a little food down.

Rakim, for the most part, felt fine, only showing fever-like symptoms at that point. That all changed on the night of day 4 as he awoke to a throbbing headache and, upon exiting his room to get water, he

passed out, May in the hallway. In all his 15 years of life, Rakim had never been panicked, and with the throbbing headache, he quickly felt lightheaded.

He somehow managed to set her into a recovery position as he called the police, mistakenly dialling the numbers. His hands were too sweaty for precision work that a smartphone requires, and unlike in an old-fashioned phone, the numbers didn't bulge out. Luckily, the operator managed to help him contact the right people and talk him through CPR.

(Ah, ha, ha, ha, stayin' alive, stayin' alive) It was the only thing he could remember as his world spun and he tried to recall the CPR training from when they did their swimming badges. The operator on the phone, as sweet as she was, tried to talk him through it, offering her support in a calm and reassuring manner. However, if one were to ask Rakim what he felt in that moment, he would have told her to please be silent in a less polite manner.

May remembered waking up in a haze, her chest in pain with bruised ribs as she gasped for air. A sweaty Rakim slumped over her, his half-dyed hair that had grown out into a little afro looking oily as he himself seemed drained entirely. He sent her a weak but relieved smile when her eyes finally managed to lock on to his, only to lose consciousness, falling over her.

If her cracked ribs made it hard for her to breathe, then his 80kg didn't help matters. After struggling in shock to get him off her, she only remembered thinking how hot he was. He was quite literally a living furnace, making her wonder how a person's body temperature could reach such a high level.

Luckily, she didn't have to worry for long, as a group of paramedics burst through the front door, along with a police officer. She remembered being glad that help had arrived, but the relief had come too soon. They had been brought to an overcrowded hospital, and while she was left somewhat stable in one of the corridors, Rakim received treatment.

Granted, she had been slipping in and out of consciousness, unsuccessfully trying to flag down a nurse or doctor each time. When she regained some of her strength the next day, it was already too late. She managed to stumble past the doctors dressed in what she could only describe as an amungus costume to find Raki's room.

To her horror, the doctors had put him in their intensive care area, which was just a room with their worst COVID-19 cases. She was sure that he only had fever-like symptoms, nothing like what some of the severe cases were showing. Panicked, she tried to get him, only to be stopped by two nurses in protective suits.

One of the nurses, a tall man with kind eyes behind a fogged-up face shield, gently but firmly caught her arms. "Miss, you can't be in here."

"You don't understand, I need to see him! You put him in with the criticals—he's not like them!" May gasped, her throat hoarse from dehydration and emotion.

"Miss, calm down, it's going to be ok. They were taking good care of him," The lady next to him said, trying to placate her, but May wasn't having any of it. "The patient came in with a 40°C fever, qualifying him as critical. Don't worry, we really are doing everything to treat him."

"I don't wanna hear that he only had a fever, none of the other fever symptoms, no Sore throat, no Muscle or body aches, not even a cough," She responded in agitation, half wondering if she was remembering the right symptoms. But she was feeling wobbly and was already on a roll, unable to apply the brakes to assess the situation. "Him being in this room is likely making him sicker than that fever."

The two looked startled at her words, but were unwilling to believe her, after all, they had been treating hundreds of thousands of COVID-19 patients. "Look, miss, I know you're worried, but this is really the

best place for him." The man tried to explain, immediately going on the defensive as his malpractice senses started tingling.

While he wouldn't be directly implicated since he was a nurse, he knew that the higher-ups would rather blame a nurse than the doctors. After all, who would side with an easily replaceable sheepdog over a shepherd that generated millions in product sales each year? Do you think doctors are expensive? Well, so are CEOs and executives in those big institutions and you don't see them getting fired until it's absolutely necessary.

They would rather lay off millions of workers if they incur losses than the people running the business. That same logic applies in every industry, and worst of all, in the medical industry. Paul, the male nurse, knew this very well, and for this reason, he was unwilling to take a risk, even if they had made a mistake. Ana, despite being a little slow, was quick to reach the same conclusion and prepared to placate the girl in front of her.

Chapter 564 564 I Will Go Old Testament On You!

[Date: 24 April 2020 | Location: Cologne University Hospital – Isolation Wing | Time: 14:19]

Nurse Ana's voice trembled—barely, but enough to be noticed. "Miss, I know you're worried, but you have to understand... we're under extreme protocols. This pandemic is chaos. Mistakes happen—but we are doing the best we can."

Paul, the male nurse, stood to the side, arms crossed now, his face shield fogged again, barely managing to hold back his glare from piercing Ana when she mentioned mistakes. "I understand there's some confusion," he said, offering a diplomatic smile that didn't reach his eyes. "Your partner is receiving the highest standard of care we can offer in these circumstances. But we do ask that families trust the system and refrain from creating unnecessary stress or disruption—"

"You think I give a damn about your justifications?" she snapped. "You're scared of a lawsuit? Good. Because when the press finds out that Bayer Leverkusen's wunderkind—Rakim Rex—valued at 100 million euros—was misdiagnosed, mistreated, and dumped in your contagion ward because some lazy doctor couldn't admit they made a mistake?"

Ana blinked, not quite understanding what the girl was getting at; however, Paul's face paled. Even Halberstadt, the attending doctor in the ward, who had been half listening to their argument, stiffened. His hands were twitching toward the hem of his protective suit, trying to pinch himself just to make sure he wasn't dreaming.

May didn't care, though, as she continued. "That'll be nothing compared to what happens when the club's legal team, the Deutscher Fußball-Bund, or heck, when his parents get involved." As if a light bulb went off in her head, she pulled out her phone and dialled Lisa's number.

"You know, many people don't know since he is like a different person on the field, but his parents are quite wealthy, so good luck explaining this shit show." She said in anger, half wondering why she hadn't done this in the first place.

Waiting for the phone to ring once, then twice, felt like listening to the end gongs in their ears. "What are you doing?" Ana asked, voice strained.

She didn't answer her as a crackling sound came from the screen as the call was answered. "...May?" Lisa's voice sounded groggy, disoriented.

May's tone softened—but only slightly. "I'm sorry for waking you, Lisa, but Rakim and I were rushed to Cologne Hospital last night. He's in critical care right now... but it's not what you think. The problem is they put him in the critical COVID wing when he only had a high fever."

There was a long pause on the other end of the line, causing me to wonder whether the connection had broken up halfway through.

Lisa was not a woman who frightened easily. She had negotiated with top clubs across Europe, fought off brand vultures, trying to get the best deal for her son. She had even personally interviewed the Cambridge student advisor when her daughter had decided to attend. Unlike other parents, she had grilled the advisors on what exactly her daughter would receive for \$60,240 a year.

Her husband had been happy enough that their children were living their dream, but for her peace of mind, she needed four-point verification.

But nothing made her heart sink like hearing that one of her children was sick or in danger, so hearing that her son was in critical care felt like an artillery shell had just exploded nearby. She needed a moment to regain her bearings, but when she did, fury replaced worry for a second. "Hey, hooney, are you ok?"

"Uh yeah, though I feel a little light-headed," she quickly responded, not expecting the calmness with which she had responded, given all she had witnessed the woman do, such as chew out a judge at one of their cheer tournaments back in high school.

"That's good that you're ok. Please hand the phone to whoever was in charge. I want to have a chat with them." (um) was the only thing May could say as she handed the phone over to the doctor standing behind the two nurses.

The man was surprised to suddenly be handed the phone since he had made sure to stay quiet as the two dealt with the 'rowdy' patient. Before he could even think of refusing, he had brought the phone to the side of his ear separated by the thin medial suit. "Hello?"

He had been expecting an angry mother, but the voice coming across was surprisingly calm and sweet. "First, I'd like to thank you for helping the kids last night."

"Um, sure it's our job, of course," He quickly responded with a confident smile, completely letting his guard down.

"For your sacrifice in these hard times, we are all thankful, but if I don't get an explanation on why my son is in the critical COVID wing, so help me god, I will go Old Testament on you and your hospital." Dr. Halberstadt's throat went dry.

The soft-spoken threat slithered through the line like cold steel wrapped in velvet. Despite the pleasant tone, it hit harder than any courtroom cross-examination. "I-I understand your concern, Mrs. Rex. As I was just explaining to—"

"I wasn't asking for understanding," Lisa cut in, voice sharper now. "I just want to let you know that I only have one son, and if even the slightest chance that you people have mis-treated him, I will use all my wealth and time making your lives very difficult, hero or not."

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[Date: 28 April 2020 | Lockdown Week 5 | Time: 14:44 AM | Location: Freud & Croft Private Memorial Hospital]

"Excuse me, Miss Parker, but we have to check his vitals," A nurse of Chinese descent dressed in a protective suit and face shield said as she stepped into the room.

"Sure, and thank you, Dr Lui," May responded as she stood up from her chair and sat back on her bed, giving the nurse space to do her job.

"You don't have to say thank you every time, you know," The woman responded as she pulled out the chart at the end of the bed.

"I know, but our families and I are truly thankful for all you guys have done for us since we arrived here." She told her, showing genuine joy despite the circumstances, as the nurses and doctors had really been friendly to them despite being busy with the ongoing pandemic.

Dr Lui offered a tired but appreciative nod as she checked the monitor. The soft, rhythmic beep of Rakim's heart filled the quiet room, beating strongly. "Vitals are stable. That's good," Miss Lui murmured more to herself than to May. She scribbled a note on the chart. "Still a bit warm, but the fever's trending down."

May breathed out a sigh she hadn't realised she was holding. "Thank God, but why is he still unconscious?"

She watched in silence as Dr Lui gently adjusted the IV lines and double-checked the oxygen feed. Every movement was precise, clinical as she made sure that Rakim was okay.

"You know," the doctor said, voice soft but clear beneath the shield, "I saw him play once. It was the season opener against Paderborn when he made his debut for the team. It wasn't a big match, but my

brother dragged me along—he's a Leverkusen fan. Said there was this sixteen-year-old mixed-race kid with green eyes and a killer first touch that would take them to the promised land."

A faint smile tugged at May's lips. "Hahah, that's definitely him, he wakes up thinking about football."

"Don't worry, he is strong and will pull through. The fever and his exposure to critical COVID-19 patients made things worse, but I don't see why he shouldn't come out on the other end." The doctor said as she clipped the board back in place, having completed the last of the checks.

"I know it's just hard seeing him like this. Dr Becker said he wasn't in a coma, but they can't figure out why he hasn't woken up yet." May expressed a mix of complaint and helplessness regarding the situation.

"I know how frustrating it is, but... (Beep beep beep beep)" Before she could finish her words, the steady rhythm on the heart monitor abruptly spiked—beep beep beep-beep-beep-beep-beep-beep—a jarring distortion that cut through the sterile quiet like an air raid siren. Dr. Lui's eyes shot to the screen.

"O<sub>2</sub> saturation dropping!" she barked at herself more than anyone, her fatigue vanishing in an instant. She rushed to the head of the bed, eyes darting between Rakim's face and the numbers flashing red across the screen.

"He's going into respiratory distress!" she muttered before punching the blue button on the wall, causing the blue light to flash and a pre-recorded voice to be broadcast through the speakers. "Code Blue, Code Blue, Code Blue,"

May sat frozen on her bed, blood running cold as she watched Rakim's body start to twitch—his chest rising in shorter, shallower intervals. His lips darkened slightly, a bluish tint beginning to form around them. It was like something invisible was crushing his throat from the inside. "No, no, no—what's happening?" she gasped, trying to move closer.

## Chapter 565 Let It Go

"May! Step back now!" Dr. Lui ordered, already donning a pair of sterile gloves.

The automatic whipped open, and within seconds, the room filled with a half-dozen figures in protective suits—two nurses and a trauma doctor wheeling a crash cart. One of the nurses dragged May gently but firmly away from the bed as the lead doctor took Dr. Lui's place, barking rapid instructions.

In the chaos, no one noticed the tall and lean man standing behind the see-through glass next to the entrance. He was dressed in comfortable yet luxurious clothing, accentuating his dark-brown hair touched with silver at the temples. But the first thing one noticed was sharp, grey-green eyes that were locked onto the figure of Rakim receiving treatment.

His eyes held a cautious worry in them, almost unsure of whether he was allowed to be here, which was a new feeling for a man of his stature whose world quite literally revolved around his every whim. "Neck swelling—possible angioedema—his airway is constricting! We need to intubate now!"

"Adrenaline injection—NOW!" Dr. Lui called out, grabbing a syringe from the tray.

A nurse jabbed the auto-injector into Rakim's thigh as another quickly cleared the area around his mouth. His whole neck was swelling grotesquely, veins bulging like cords under the skin as the oxygen mask fogged with panic.

"Bag-valve mask! Let's get some air in him before we lose the window!" one nurse called, slapping the AMBU bag into place and pumping manually.

The lead doctor yanked open the laryngoscope. "Get ready with the tube—pushing 20 of etomidate and 100 of succinylcholine."

Rakim's limbs jolted once—violently—before going limp. His breathing stopped entirely. May screamed.

"His airway's almost closed—we're losing him!" A calm yet deadly urgency filled the air as the doctor inserted the laryngoscope blade and angled the light down Rakim's throat. "I see the cords—tube in—inflate cuff—connect oxygen!"

Another nurse handed over the ventilator tubing. "Tube secured!"

"Check breath sounds—left and right."

"Clear on both."

"Capnography confirmed. Tube's good. He's stable—for now."

A dull silence fell in the room as the mechanical hum of the ventilator took over, the only sound besides May's muffled sobbing into her sleeves. The beep of the monitor returned, steadier now, but no less ominous. It was no longer Rakim's body doing the work—the machine was breathing for him.



Dr. Lui backed away, her hands trembling slightly as the adrenaline began to wear off. She turned to May, her voice tight. "He... he had a sudden inflammatory reaction—his airway closed up fast. We call it a cytokine storm, but that was too fast. It's like his immune system just... snapped."

May wiped her eyes, voice breaking. "Is he going to make it?"

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Rakim, who had just returned from fetching water from the river, suddenly felt a bout of weakness. The feeling was so sudden that it overwhelmed him, and before he could even react, he crashed to the ground, powerless to respond. It felt like he was drawing from the air; the very thing he needed to live was killing him.

For three minutes, he felt himself dying as his lungs clawed at nothing—air thick as wet cement. The jungle colours drained to grey, and then to white, until only the river's rush remained, echoing as though from under ice. Rakim found himself barefoot on a polished corridor floor that reflected pale light from nowhere. Tall mirrors lined each side. In their fractured glass, he caught flashes of his own life:

— a baby held in the arms of a loving mother whose face he couldn't see

— The early years of torture at the hands of his relative until the eventual sale.

— The deciding moment when he chose to escape towards freedom, finding his family

— A 6-year-old boy dribbling on different pitches, expressing his brand of football.

— The year he played in Santos in a youth cup in Brazil, meeting the prince of modern football.

— When he mustered the courage to finally ask May out. Their dance at prom melded with many other beautiful memories.

— Different family holidays, events, birthdays, both sweet and sad, flash by as he continued walking up the golden steps.

— He was roaring when images of him scoring various goals and dribbling past players flashed by.

— {Wake up}, a familiar voice appeared in his mind, stopping him in his tracks just as he was about to step into the gate of light.

His sudden stop seemed to trigger something, and his world went black; he found himself waking up gasping for breath. His blurry vision took a moment to clear up, but when it did, a figure dressed in a navy boarding-school blazer appeared leaning against a tree. "Wow, that was close, almost lost you there, buddy."

"'hic hoof' W'what 'hic hoof', the fuck 'hoof' was that," He caughed out as he glared at the ghost that took on the image of his friend.

"Hmm, haven't you realised it yet?" Liam simply asked with a tilt of his head, enjoying the fact that his childhood friend was struggling for once. "I guess you have been here too long, but even I expected better from you."

"No, but I tried everything and know that this is real," Rakim retorted, obviously understanding what Liam was insinuating, but no matter what, he was unwilling to believe it now. It was one thing to lose hope after realising that there wasn't any, but the story became quite different when you realised that there was hope after all.

"Is it though?" was all Liam said, looking genuinely confused as if waiting for him to give the answer to the question. "Or, hear me out, or is it that you want this to be real so bad that you made it so?"

"Why would I even want this nightmare to be real when I spent most of my life trying to forget this?" He questioned, feeling as if Liam was simply saying to blame the victim. "Ok, let's say you're right for a second, and that's a big if. What do you want me to do?"

Propping his chin on his hand, Liam seemed to be deep in thought, seemingly trying to come up with an answer. As if coming to a conclusion, he smacked his fist on the other hand as his face visibly brightened. "Just let it go."

Silence was what followed his words. "Huh, did you just say to let it go?"

"Yeah, just let it go," Liam simply nodded, head bobbing for emphasis.

"How the fu#£ am I supposed to let it go, ...don't you think.... you..." After an outburst of explosives and a string of curses from Rakim.

"Imagine you're holding a pen — before you go too far, not a special pen with your initials engraved on it that will make this next part really hard," Liam confidently explained in all seriousness without a hint of joking, almost looking like a teacher handing out instructions to a student.

"Did you just.." Rakim stammered in befuddlement. "Actually, never mind, just shut up since you're basically useless anyway, I'll figure it out on my own."

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[Location: Eastern DRC | Abandoned Schoolhouse | Time: 06:43 AM | Date: 29 April 2020]

The last of the embers from the morning fire hissed beneath the cracked metal pot Kosongo had used to heat the ration stew. Steam curled gently toward the broken rafters above as the squad stirred sleep from their bones. Rakim stood by the window, with a serene expression as he gazed at the horizon that was illuminated by the morning sun.

He was processing the surreal interaction with the ghost of his friend and seemed to understand what was going on. He came to the conclusion that part of him had unfinished business with his past life and was unwilling to let go. For that, it had created a world or a dream that lived along the lines of what would have happened if he had survived.

It made sense and also explained Liam's presence here, since if this had been his true life, he would have thought that someone much closer would be haunting him. No offence to Liam, who was his boy and the closest thing to a brother he would ever have, they are not as close as they used to be as kids.

That didn't mean he didn't have love for him, but if this was his fucked up life, then he expected someone with more impact on his life to haunt him. For that, only five people came to mind: his parents, his sister Emma, May, and, of course, Eva. "Looks like what they say about being your own worst enemy is true,"

"Huh, did you say something, brother Rakim?" Kwame asked after having just woken up due to the tantalising scent of the food.

"Not important, let's just eat out. It doesn't seem safe to stay here longer than we have to," he responded with a bright smile as he turned to take a seat, not bothering to mention the fact that he spotted Abu meeting with someone suspicious just past the tree lines.

#### Chapter 566 Evaluation

"Just leave that, there's no point caring about the environment when we kill for a living," Abu said, stopping Kwame from cleaning up their makeshift camp as they loaded goods onto the jeeps.

Kwame frowned, the rag still in his hand, half-folded. "You sound like the kind of guy who pisses in a church just because it's empty."

Abu chuckled, slinging a dented rucksack into the back of the vehicle. "I'd piss in it even if it were full, no way I'd respect a religion where the head honchos f£\$k little boys." He retorted with a sarcastic grin that seemed to dare the younger boy to test him.

Kwame's jaw clenched, the rag crumpling in his hand. "That's just sad." He retorted in a low tone, but it was enough to draw glances from Kosongo and Rakim as they stood by the schoolhouse's arched doorway.

Abu smirked, but there was bitterness in his eyes. "How do you still have your morals, choir boy, when you gun down kids your own age?"

Just as Kosongo was about to get in between them, a tracer round struck the wall behind them, followed by the (ratatatata) of a mounted machine gun. "Grab cover," he exclaimed, pulling Michle, who was like a deer in headlights, down behind one of the jeeps.

Bullets shredded through the walls, cars and anything getting in its way. "Fuck," Abu exclaimed, clutching his left shoulder that gushed with fresh blood after being pierced by a stray bullet.

Rakim, who was hiding behind the jeep, closed his eyes for a moment, trying to channel the adrenaline that was now coursing through his veins. They snapped open the very next second, and he got to work, ignoring the frantic shouts of his comrades. Pulling out one of the grenades from his pouch, he pulled the pin and waited for a second.

Despite the gunfire, he managed to pick up a set of footsteps approaching their location. Without bothering to consider it, he flicked his wrist, throwing the grenade out. The grenade arced over the hood of the jeep like a fiery comet and disappeared behind a crumbling wall. Three seconds later— BOOM!

The blast shook the earth, sending a plume of dirt, brick, and bloodied limbs into the air. The concussive wave silenced the machine gun fire for a brief moment, giving the group a vital window. "Suppressing fire, now!" Kosongo barked, raising his battered AK and unloading short, controlled bursts toward the treeline. Kwame followed suit from the side of the schoolhouse, leaning out just far enough to keep his head down.

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"Huh, where am I now?" I muttered out loud to no one in particular as I looked up at the blue sky. I instantly recognised where I was since I had been here once before during the early days of receiving the system.

However, I hadn't been able to get the system to react, let alone talk to Eva, over the past two weeks or so. The fact I was here made sense in a way, but also didn't at the same time. After all, I had just managed to make peace with my past life after the 20th life through.

Yes, turns out I would continue to live in a loop in that place, either dying in various ways or getting my revenge. I managed to escape twice, survive three times, and even take over the camp twice, preventing Abu's betrayal on two occasions. Turns out the circumstances twisted the guy, and he wanted to watch it all burn.

Kwame was the voice of good, finding happiness even in the most challenging situations. In contrast, Kosongo was the perfect soldier who followed orders no matter how bad, content with being the right-hand man of the chief. No matter what he did, whether it be following either of their dispositions or doing his own thing, he would end up dying.

It was like a wacky spin-off of Two Distant Strangers, which always ended the same way. In one life, I escaped the day before the Michle pick up and managed to sneak past the enemies. Upon arriving in a safe town, I reported the two groups and everyone associated with various international agencies and news outlets.

That was the only time I lived to 20, got a regular job and even thought about starting a family. That all came to an end when an assassin sent by the people who backed Michle paid me a visit, killing the family I was living with before I followed. It took me that long to realise that all I was doing was running, so in life, through 21, I faced myself.

No, I did not box myself, though that would have been hilarious, but I had a simple conversation with my reflection. Ok, that sounds like I'm crazy, but so was the situation, so I wasn't too surprised when my reflection responded when I asked what it wanted?'

We had a deep conversation and I was forced to face all the pain, anger and despair I felt. You know about the five stages of grief, yeah, that is a lot of Bs, only applicable when dealing with parent issues and targeted at one thing? If you have one aspect or person to channel all your blame towards, it's easier to tackle it gradually.

However, in my case, everything was a mess, and part of me blamed my blood relatives. Another part hated the people who not only took my youth but also thrust me into a life of despair. But the deeper I dug, I realised that part of me blamed my mother for dying, just ever being able to voice it, while my father became the convenient parent to hate.

It was only after days of therapy, which just consisted of me talking to myself, that I realised that I truly blamed myself. It was hard coming to that conclusion, but upon analysing what was different in my new life and old, the common denominator was me. I had taken the first step to a different outcome by choosing to escape, while in my last lie, I had been paralysed by fear to even think of acting.

Choosing happiness in this life had been the key, causing me to feel grateful I hadn't rejected my mum's offer to become her son that day on the boat. Being able to forgive everyone whom I felt had wronged me was surprisingly easy when push came to shove; doing it for myself was much harder.

{But you did it, though, and you should be proud of that,} Eva's familiar voice resounded in my head, causing my eyes to well up as I realised just how much I missed her presence.

"Yeah, I guess, but couldn't you have just put me through virtual therapy instead of that twisted place?" I complained, knowing that it was necessary for me to face my past, but I wouldn't wish that on my worst enemies.

{Hmm, I tried, but you always had somewhere better to be or more training to do?} She off handedly complained, effortlessly deflecting the blame.

"Yeah, and who was the person creating my extra training menu?" I retorted, knowing full well that if she wanted, she could have simply stopped supporting me, forcing me to do what she needed me to. "Anyways, it's good to hear your voice again."

{Me too, though you made me worry for a bit there}

"Worry?" I asked, sitting up in the endless blue expanse that served as our meeting place. "What do you mean?"

{Well, when someone goes through twenty-one loops of trauma, worry is the least I could do} Eva replied, her tone carrying a mixture of relief and lingering concern. I wasn't sure if you'd lose your sanity at some point or if you were just slow to... let's say process things, that's why I sent Liam, well, your mental image of him.}

I let out a bitter laugh, running my hands through my hair. "Processing is one way to put it. More like having a complete mental breakdown and rebuilding myself from scratch." I paused, staring at my hands. "How long was I actually in there? It felt like years."

{Time works differently in psychological reconstruction scenarios. What felt like months to you was compressed into a week and a half in real-time. Your mind needed to experience the full weight of those memories and emotions to sort them properly.}

(Huff) Letting out a sigh of relief that the time hadn't been much, a wry smile appeared on my face as this had been the second coma I was now in. "So why am I here?"

{Well, you have officially lived past your last life, and the day for your System evaluation has arrived.}

Chapter 567 567 [Invictus]

[FOOTBALL SINGULARITY SYSTEM]

USER: Rakim Rex

AGE: 16yrs

TALENT ASSESSMENT: Grade - S -> SS+

Singularity Points: 5400 +50,630

Position: Winger

(Evaluation: A wunderkind? What is that? You are a monster with untapped potential.)

[USER STATS: Under 23 Grade]

>Physical Fitness: A -> A++

Balance and Coordination: S+

Speed: S

Agility: A++ -> S

Strength: B- -> A

Stamina: B- -> A+

>Football Technique: S - SS+

>Game Intelligence: A

>Mental Ability: S -> SS+

>Singularity Traits: Mamba Mentality (Garde Unique), MR ShowTime: (Grade -A),

>Skills

*Silver Grade: Eagle King's Goal Sense (Passive)

*Silver Level Comeback Kid (Passive)

*Bronze Ankle Brace (Passive)

*Bronze Heavy artillery (Active)

[Ding: !Wonderkid! (Completed)]

#Task 1 New Kid: Join any type of football team (1/1)

#Task 2 Real contender: Reach the Knockout stage in a competition (1/1)

#Task 3 Goal Machine: Win a Golden Boot (1/1) "New"

#Task 4 Shark in a pond: Have 3 of your physical stats reach the S Rank (3/3)

#Task 5 7 Wonders: Create Unforgettable Goals in one season (7/7)

Rewards:

1) > 1000 SP

2) > 5,000 SP

3) > 20,000 Sp

4) > Lottery Draw, upgrade to armature level -> Changed to Elite Trait.

5) > A Random Player Specific Skills

"Well, that's cool, but I'm confused about the sudden jump in my stats?" Rakim voiced as he looked at the screen in front of him, as he now sat up on the grass.

{You are almost 17, you know that, right?} Eva light-heartedly responded in a matter-of-fact tone that asked him to give an answer.

"Yeah, are you short-circuiting or something? Should I get a genius from the Apple store?" He responded in a joking tone, trying to get a rise out of her, but to no success.

{Maybe you should really consider therapy to get rid of the delusion that you could be a comedian.} She responded in a matter-of-fact voice as the floating screen in front of him changed to display various therapy offices near the place he lived. {Anyway, this is the game when regular academy players begin to bloom, looking for a way to break into the main squad.}

Ignoring the hurt expression and over-exaggerated acting, Rakim performed because of her comments, she continued with her explanation. {You, my dear host, have experienced a similar state early, which I

dubbed the Pelé state, for when talented young kids step onto the stage early, becoming so-called wunderkids.}

"Wait, wait, hold up, I know it's just the Scottish league, but I did debut earlier than Pelé, so does this really apply to me?" Rakim interrupted after seeing that Eva did not plan on acknowledging his antics.

{Sigh, I dubbed it the Pelé state, because of what comes next and for the simple fact he was the first to meet the second conditions and exceed his potential.} She responded before proceeding to give examples of young wunderkids who, despite showing promise early, failed to turn that into longevity in their career. {The second part is what I like to call the Freddy Adu ceiling, where wunderkids, similar to child actors who have seen early success and hype, fail to break that final barrier to truly launch their career.}

"So I've broken this called ceiling, but how?" He asked, understanding what she was getting at.

{Oh, you did by facing your past and making peace with what is holding you back.} She calmly responded, sending a soothing sensation through his body. {Like the saying, all roads lead to Rome, the Ceiling is different for everyone. A perfect example is Freddy Adu, who debuted at the tender age of 14, signing a \$1 million Nike deal.}

Upon the mention of the man, Rakim remembered reading about him growing up. There weren't a lot of footballers who had experienced the same situation as him in their football journey. He had become a cautionary tale, prompting him to stay at Ace Academy for a year longer before embarking on his professional journey.

When they had analysed why his career seemingly imploded, many things played a factor. He had skipped development steps, which cost him greatly as he lost form over time. Last he heard, the man had played for 13 clubs in 9 different countries, becoming a shell of the player he could have been.

{A complete opposite is Spanish Bojan Krkić, he peaked at 17, breaking Messi's debut record for Barcelona. He was crushed at the immense pressure of being the next Messi, suffering from severe anxiety attacks.} Eva explained as article's and images showcasing the Spanish player's chaotic career were shown to him.

{The point is,} she concluded, {breaking the Adu Ceiling isn't about raw talent; it's about maturing as a player by discovering your playstyle or weapons that allow you to survive at the next level. You finally reconciled with your past, which, while being an emotional ceiling, is a ceiling nonetheless. That's why every metric jumped.}

Rakim let the words settle, lying back down on the grass, letting his eyes roam the drifting clouds. "So what's next?" He simply asked, assuming she wouldn't bring this up without a reason.

{Well, I may have forgotten to tell you, but since you have passed the date of your previous death, it is judgment day.} She dramatically stated like some two-bit MC at an awards show, trying to make you care when you really don't. {Basically, the system has evaluated your use of it using various criteria on which you will be evaluated.}

"You definitely didn't bother mentioning this in the decade I've had the system," Rakim retorted with a hint of dissatisfaction at not being told such important information. "Then again, maybe it's better I didn't know that kind of pressure would have led to half a life."

{Indeed, if you had known you would lose access to the system, it would have only led to unnecessary stress.} She casually explained, sounding as if she had just explained to us the breakfast menu.

"Wait a minute, what's this about losing the system?" Startled by the mention of that fact, Rakim immediately sat up from the grass in a mix of shock and panic. He had lived without the system in that twisted dream, and the idea of going back to that unsettled him.

{Sigh, you hardly use the system anyway, so don't worry about it. Plus, you will retain a stat screen and don't forget about the evaluation rewards that will be in the worms of talents.} Eva quickly explained, unwilling to let his thoughts roam any further than necessary. {Just wait and see before judging.}

[Evaluation complete]

- Happiness Score: 10/10

- Acolades: 45

- Marketability: S

- Social Impact: 20%

- Current Career impact: 4/10

- Career Potential: Mount Rushmore

Overall Evaluation: You stand on the cusp of greatness in your chosen career path. Personal fulfilment and your impact on those around you are astonishing, drastically changing their original life trajectory for the better. Commercial power is already at an elite level.

Currently obtained: Singularity Points: $5400 + 50,630 + 26,000 = 82,030$

>Singularity Traits: Mamba Mentality (Garde Unique), MR ShowTime: (Grade -A),

>Currently Obtained Skills:

*Silver Grade: Eagle King's Goal Sense (Passive)

*Silver Grade: Comeback Kid (Passive)

*Bronze Grade: Ankle Brace (Passive)

*Bronze Grade: Heavy artillery (Active)

Rewards:

#Mamba Mentality (Garde Unique) + MR ShowTime: (Grade -A) + Bronze Grade: Ankle Brace (Passive) skill + Bronze Grade: Heavy artillery (Active) -> Singularity Tallent: [Invictus]

#Silver Grade: Eagle King's Goal Sense (Passive) + Silver Grade: Comeback Kid (Passive) -> [Spatial Goal Scent]

#Singularity Trait: [Sponge Body]

Note: "Good luck on your journey towards becoming a singularity."

"I think that's the first time the system has ever said something nice without a snide comment," Rakim muttered after coming to terms with the evaluation.

{Must be a glitch}

Chapter 568 Who are you

Date: 04/05/2020 | Lockdown Week 5 | Time: 12:44 AM | Location: Freud & Croft Private Memorial Hospital]

A hiss—steady, predatory—filled Rakim's skull before the light did as he slowly regained consciousness. (Whhssss-tup ... whhssss-tup.) Air rammed down his throat in mechanical surges, and every pulse felt wrong, like someone kneading his chest from the inside. He subconsciously tried to swallow, but failed as plastic pressed against the back of his tongue and panic flooded in.

His eyes cracked open the next second as cream-coloured ceiling tiles blurred in and out of focus. He gagged in reflex as the rising of his chest intensified, causing the oxygen entering his body to flood his system. His already blurry eyes moistened as he struggled to lift his arms, but he could hardly exert his strength.

In panic, he managed to turn his head slightly as his heart started racing, causing the monitoring device to blare in alarm. At the edge of his unfocused vision, he spotted a figure dressed in a penguin suit reacting in a panic. In hindsight, it was a suit, but at that very moment, Rakim didn't care; he just hoped whoever it was would help him out.

The man in question was so panicked that he almost tripped over the loose hospital overalls he was wearing. But he managed to stay upright after making eye contact, breathing a sigh of relief as the dread that had built up the moment the machines turned to excitement. "—He's awake—Doctor! Doctor!" He immediately sprinted to the open door as the words tore out of him at the speed of a machine gun.

The clatter of hurried footsteps filled the corridor, echoing through the glass doors as the heart monitor screamed its alarm. Rakim on the bed had managed to regain some of his strength and started clawing at the wires and tube attached to his mouth. May, on the adjacent bed, had been in dreamland, jolted awake at the commotion, and immediately jumped off her bed.

Half-dazed, she saw Rakim thrashing, eyes wild in panic as he scraped at the ventilator tube. "Raki— stop!" she croaked, voice raw. Running to his side, she grasped his hands in an attempt to stop him from hurting himself. "Just focus on me, listen to my voice, I've got you."

While struggling to hold back his arms that were now pumping with adrenaline, she gently spoke into his ear. Despite struggling for a bit, she continued to talk to him, managing to calm his emotions as he took longer and slower breaths. "Just like that, you're ok, babe," she whispered as tears streamed from her eyes, landing on his cheeks like droplets.

Rakim on the bed calmed down as he simply took in her scent and listened to her voice. Now that the initial panic was gone, his mind that had been in fight or flight mode cleared up, allowing his fuzzy vision to improve slightly. Even then, she still appeared blurry to his eyes, but he could easily recognise who it was.

Just then, a nurse charged in, followed by Dr Lui, passing by the man in the suit. "He's refusing the Tube, but he is calming down."

Dr Lui crossed to the bedside, eyes flicking between the thumping ECG and Rakim's flushed face. "Rakim, honey, can you hear me?" she asked, gloved fingers stabilising the tube-connector while the respiratory nurse checked the cuff. May wanted to move out of the way, but Rakim held onto her hand, not letting her stray too far.

Sending a deliberate blink at the doctor in response, the woman smiled in response, causing her visor to fog up lightly. She quickly checked his vitals before responding to him. "Good. You're breathing against the ventilator. We'll help you take over, but you must stay still for a moment." She turned to the nurse. "Pressure support down to six. PEEP five. Give him a PSAT."

The nurse attached a slender blue syringe to the airway port and drew a blood sample for gas analysis. Rakim's chest rose again—slower, more under his own power now that the machine's push had eased. May, still holding his right hand, felt the tremor ebb beneath her palm.

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Rakim breathed slowly, his heart beating steadily once the doctor had completed her preliminary checks. Dr Lui nodded. "Okay, champ—time to lose this straw. Count to three with me."

One... two... three—she slid the tube free, barely scratching the side of his throat. Rakim gagged, coughed hard, then drew a shaky breath all on his own. Taking the offered Oxygen mask, he placed it over his nose and mouth, enjoying the scent of clean air.

"Good," the doctor said, assessing his figure as he greedily drew in oxygen as his body stabilised. "Deep breaths—through the nose if you can."

Rakim obeyed, drawing slow pulls through the mask until the burning in his throat settled into a dull rasp. May brushed damp curls from his brow. "See? Easy," she whispered, voice shaking with relief.

Dr Lui gave a gentle nod before stepping back following Covid distancing protocol. For this reason, only two staff members had come to assess the situation instead of the usual rush of bodies. "How are you feeling, Rakim?" she asked, her voice muffled but warm behind the N95 mask. The ventilator had been wheeled aside, its rhythmic hissing replaced by the quieter hum of the oxygen concentrator feeding his mask.

Rakim tried to speak but managed only a hoarse croak. His throat felt like sandpaper, raw from the intubation. May squeezed his hand in support before proceeding to pour him a glass of water at the side table.

"Don't try to talk just yet," Dr Lui advised, making notes on her tablet. "Your vocal cords need time to recover. The swelling should go down in a few hours." She glanced at the monitors, satisfied with the steady green waves tracking across the screens. "Your oxygen saturation is good—ninety-six per cent on supplemental O2. Much better than when you arrived."

Rakim merely nodded in response as he slowly gulped down the contents of the glass in Mays' hands. The water was lukewarm, but to Rakim it felt like a nectar he was receiving in the midst of a drought. He let the first sip wet his tongue instantly, invigorating his spirit.

The sensation of water felt almost foreign to his body, but like a long-lost love, his body craved for more. "Easy tiger," May mumbled as he took quick little gulps, letting the liquid trickle down his dried throat.

Dr Lui observed quietly, her practised eye noting the way his Adam's apple moved with each swallow—a good sign that his reflexes were intact. "Small sips," she reinforced May's caution. "Your stomach hasn't had anything for days. We don't want you sick."

She gave him a few more minutes to calm down, letting his throat adjust to being active again. "Ok, just give me nods and shakes."

"Do you know who you are?" She asked first just as May placed the half-empty cup back on the side table. Her answer was met with a nod before turning into a shoulder shrug.

"Is that a yes or you don't know?" she asked for clarification, only to receive a nod from Rakim and for a second it looked like her brain short-circuited.

"I'm Rakim," his hoarse voice croaked out in response as he was seemingly unsettled by the detached glare the woman was giving.

"Then why did you say you didn't know?" she questioned as her hand moved to note something down in her notepad. She once again received a shoulder shrug from the boy who sent her a serene smile as his eyes wandered around the room in wonderlust. "Sigh, I see that's that famous sense of humour I've heard about."

"Now, jokes aside, what was the last thing you remembered?" She asked, her black eyes scanning him with scrutiny.

"Covid," he hoarsely stated before his head snapped to the side as if in panic scrutinising the figure of May next to him.

Chapter 569 Crybaby

[Date: 05/05/2020 | Lockdown Week 5 | Time: 10:24 AM | Location: Freud & Croft Private Memorial Hospital ]

"So you're my birth father, huh?" I asked, scanning the man sitting at the end of my bed.

He looked much more haggard than he did in Poland when he hung my gold medal around my neck and handed me my MVP & Golden Boot trophy. They had met once again at the New Year's party they hosted in their London estate, where he was blindsided by the man's sudden declaration that he was his



father. To me, he was an unwanted parent whom I didn't need, especially after being raised by the best parents possible in this life.

Still, from what May told me, he might be the only reason he was still alive. Just the thought of being placed in a room full of severe COVID cases sends goosebumps up my spine. In a sense, he took responsibility as a father by making sure I received adequate treatment.

Plus, judging by how haggard he looked, he must have been here for days, putting himself at risk of catching the disease. Looking at his imposing bearing, which he exuded despite his slightly dishevelled dark-brown hair that had more strains of silver. Even in that state, his intense grey eyes made me subconsciously more aware of him despite the warmth in them.

Crossing his right leg over his left, he rested his right elbow against the armrest before he spoke, sounding surprisingly careful. "I am, though I'm not sure I deserve to be," he said calmly, voice low, refined, tinged with fatigue and something resembling regret. "It's... complicated, far more than a single conversation can untangle. But let me start by saying I'm glad you're alive."

I didn't reply right away, and for the first time, I really looked at him. He looked different from what I had imagined him to be when I was younger. Though his presence did match the image of an imposing figure, the young me had dreamed of coming to rescue me.

Keeping those thoughts in mind, a smile appeared on my face. "Thank you, Father," I said, feeling my eyes moisten on their own as the man across from me seemed shell-shocked.

"W'what you'u called me father?" he shakily asked as his refined bravado was shattered for a moment. The silence that followed his stuttered response stretched long enough for the hum of the oxygen machine to fill the space like an awkward third party in the room.

Father. I'd said it on impulse, half out of spite, half out of curiosity, wanting to see what it felt like calling him that. Honestly, I'm not sure why I did it. "Thank you for your help," I simply clarified, not willing to let the awkward atmosphere linger any longer.

"Yes, how are you feeling?" I shifted slightly against the pillows, surprised at the effort it took me just for this little movement.

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[Date: 12/05/2020 | Time: 07:08 AM | Location: Rakim's Villa – Hahnwald, Cologne]

The birds outside hadn't gotten the memo about the lockdown. They chirped like the world was whole again, weaving their song through the open balcony doors and into the upstairs bedroom. Sunlight slanted in golden and low, brushing past the gauzy curtains, spilling the sounds of the wind chimes into the bedroom.

Rakim's naked upper body peeked over the large covers, with the only piece of clothing being the straps of the bottom half of his pyjamas wrapped around his waist. He lay there, half-awake in REM sleep, his eyelids fluttering now and then as his body wrestled between consciousness and dreams. May curled up beside him, dressed in a baggy pink hoodie and night shorts, her emerald eyes shining as her slender fingers drew small circles on his chest.

This silence lasted for a good while as she continued to scan his features, seemingly trying to savour the moment before she would wake up from her dream. In the hospital, she had many of these dreams where she wished she could go back to the previous week where they lived carefree in their own little lockdown bubble.

However, each time she would wake up to the grim sound of the hospital heart monitor next to her bed. May's touch slowed as she watched his face twitch in response, seemingly unwilling to wake up. Her fingers paused, hovering an inch above his cheek, before she leaned in and softly whispered, "You're safe."

Rakim stirred with a faint grunt, his light green eyes blinking open in the sunlight as he looked up at the mosaic ceiling. This had been a feature of the house that the owner had designed, hiring an artist to create different paintings in each bedroom. Looking up at the fairy-like flowerfield at the backdrop of a waterfall, he took a deep breath as he oriented himself.

Turning his head, he met her almond-shaped eyes that looked a little puffy, indicating she had cried recently. "Sigh, people are gonna start thinking I'm a bully if you keep crying every day. You never used to be a crybaby," he rasped, voice still a bit hoarse but lighter than days prior.

"I like watching you wake up," she murmured, smiling as her hand returned to rest gently on his chest. "It was too scary just watching you sleep, and all they could tell me was that you were not in a coma but a sleep-like state."

"I still feel bad waking up to you having cried every morning." He responded, propping up his upper body against the headboard, fully showcasing his Adonis-like physique.

He had recovered much faster than the doctors had expected, quickly regaining around 75% of his physical strength. His sponge body singularity trait, despite being a passive thing, now had greater effects than he had imagined. His body absorbed the best nutrients from the healthy meals he devoured, while eliminating the bad.

It felt like he had a filtration system made out of nanobots, as he had noticed that he had a faster retention rate in physical exercises. The Invictus talent, which was an almost pure mental and instinctual talent, made this OP. He had quite literally gained from adversity, as despite losing the system with all its knick-knacks, he had gained tools to survive.

"It's ok, I'll figure it out," May responded with a smile so warm it could melt icebergs. "Let's just get up, how do you feel about milk rice?"

Despite wanting to say more, he simply nodded, deciding it was better to eat first before tackling the problems of the day. "Hmm,"

Talent's:

[Invictus]

-> Grants the host unparalleled cognitive ability, heightening the processing of all types of sensory information: Sound, sight, hearing, smell, touch, and emotional. Heightens physical sensitivity, allowing instantaneous processing of received information.

(Comment: The skill that made the 12 labours possible.)

[Spatial Goal Scent]

-> Enhances the user's field of vision, positional awareness, and threat analysis in real time. The user's visual cortex operates at an accelerated processing rate, creating a dynamic 360-degree mental map of the pitch. Identifies and updates "hot zones" based on developing changes. Identify dangerous spaces where the ball, player, or run could maximise scoring potential.

Trait:

[Sponge Body]

-> Optimises the body's efficiency, accelerating the rate of recovery, enhancing the physical training results ingriande through repetition and improving overall body coordination.

Chapter 570 Bubble

[Date: 18/05/2020 | Time: 19:29 AM | Location: Weser Stadium | Attendance: 0]

"Good evening and welcome to Weser-Stadion for this unique Bundesliga clash. Matchday 26 kicks off under extraordinary circumstances, as football returns in Germany's pioneering 'bubble league' restart. No fans in attendance, no mascots, no handshakes—just football." Derek Rae's iconic voice resounded as an overhead shot of the two teams was shown.

"That's right, Derek. It's an eerie sight, but a necessary one. The players have gone through extensive testing, safety protocols, and social distancing in training. Now it's time to see who adapted best during lockdown." Steward Robson intoned as referee Tobias Stieler performed the last checks quickly, bringing his whistle to his lips.

[1]

(TWEET!) The whistle pierced the silence like a flare in the dark, sounding much louder than the players remembered. Kai Havertz took the first touch, rolling the ball back to Charles Aránguiz, and with that, both teams' Bundesliga campaigns continued.

The opening minutes felt surreal. Every shout from the players echoed around the empty concrete bowl, every tactical instruction from Florian Kohfeldt and Peter Bosz carried across the pitch with crystal clarity. Leverkusen immediately looked to impose their tempo, with Kerem Demirbay dropping deep to collect the ball from Sven Bender and Edmond Tapsoba.

[4]

Tennage sensation Florian Wirtz received his first meaningful touch on the right flank in the fourth minute. The 17-year-old danced past Marco Friedl with a delicate step-over that would have sent the travelling Leverkusen fans into excitement if there had been any. Instead, only the sound of studs on grass and Friedl's frustrated grunt echoed through the stadium as he scrambled to chase after him.

Wirtz whipped in a dangerous cross toward the near post into the path of Havertz, who managed to slip past Moisaner. The Danish defender, his blond hair catching the floodlights, risked it all with a lunge, managing to deflect the ball just wide of the near post. "He did the hard part, but couldn't quite connect with Kai in the box." Derek lamented as the Bremen keeper retrieved a new ball from the ball boy behind the goal.

"Indeed, we have seen glimpses of his talent in Poland, and it's safe to say he hasn't taken his foot off the throttle since," Robson commented with a smile before going off on a tangent on the strength of the young German playmaker. "From what I'm told, he excels in the midfield role, but with the abundance of talent in this Leverkusen squad, he is using his versatility to fight for minutes anywhere on the pitch."

[7']

Leverkusen control possession for the next few minutes, playing intelligent passing games around their opponents. However, in the seventh minute, Bremen's response came after Kevin Vogt came sliding in from the side, halting Amiri's dribble. Eggestein picked up the loose ball, nimbly dodging the tackle of the back-tracking Havertz.

Scanning the area ahead, he picked out Leonardo Bittencourt, who had dropped into space between the Leverkusen midfield line and defenders. The former Bayern Munich man turned with composure, not losing a step as his first touch took him away from Demirbay pressing. What followed was a moment of class: he burst past halfway, kept the defenders at bay with a quick feint, and threaded a pass through the tiniest gap to find Milot Rashica on the opposite flank.

The Kosovo international had been one of Bremen's brightest lights before the break, and his first touch showed that his sharpness hadn't dulled during the enforced hiatus. He blazed along the touch line quickly piercing into the final third as Weiser backtracked hard to keep up. With a silky step over, he managed to fool the Leverkusen right back, allowing him to cut inside past Mitchell Weiser.

His change of direction was so sharp that the defender's boots scraped audibly against the turf, slipping to the ground. Rashica didn't even hesitate as he reached the edge of the box, letting loose a venomous shot before Tapsoba could get close. At this moment, fans would have jumped up from their seats, spilling their beer as they held their breath in anticipation.

But none of that occurred as the ball curled toward the top corner, but Lukas Hradecky was equal to it, palming the ball over the crossbar with fingertips that seemed to stretch beyond physics. "Terrific stop from Hrádecký," Derek Rae's voice cut through the quiet. "Bosz will be happy to know that his keeper is back in full form."

The corner kick routine unfolded like a routine as Bittencourt stepped up to take it, his voice carrying clearly as he called out instructions to his teammates crowding the penalty area. Instructions that the opposing players would have missed in a crowded stadium were now clearly audible. The ball arced toward the far post where Niklas Moisander had positioned himself, but Tapsoba read the flight perfectly, rising above the Bremen captain to nod it clear with authority.

The clearance fell to Aranguiz just outside the box, and the Chilean midfielder didn't hesitate. One touch to control, another to shift the ball onto his favoured right foot, then a diagonal pass that sliced through Bremen's recovering defensive shape like a scalpel. Moussa Diaby had anticipated the moment beautifully, timing his run to perfection as he collected the ball a couple of yards from the halfway line.

Diaby's pace was frightening, and with acres of space opening up down the left flank, he felt the speed force within him. Theodor Gebre Selassie, Bremen's experienced right-back, along with two other defenders, had stayed back during the set piece just in case. However, when the winger approached him, picking up speed with each step, he offered less obstruction than a training cone.

The Ethiopian-born defender pumped his arms, desperately trying to chase after him, but the distance didn't seem to narrow. Lucky for him, Veljkovic, one of the central defenders, came shimmying across, managing to slow the defender somewhat just as he crossed the final third. The Frenchman didn't for things, though, choosing instead to backheel the ball to the central area ahead of the D.

With the retreating lines, none of the defenders was able to react in time as Havertz latched onto the ball. It looked like he would slip a pass into the run of Wirtz, who was coming in hot from the opposing flank, but he did not. He deftly flicked the ball back towards his left foot and sent a curled shot that hugged the ground in a curve, flying towards the bottom left corner of the goal.

Pavlenka was already diving before Havertz completed his shot, the Czech goalkeeper's instincts sharp as he read the ball's trajectory. His left hand stretched desperately toward the corner, fingertips grazing the leather just enough to send it spinning inches wide of the post. The collective exhale from both benches was audible in the empty stadium as the ball rolled harmlessly behind the goal line.

"Magnificent save from Pavlenka!" Derek Rae's voice rose with genuine excitement. "Havertz thought he had his first goal since the restart, but the Bremen keeper has other ideas."

Demirbay took the Corner kick that followed, sending an inch-perfect cross curving toward the penalty spot where Sven Bender fought for position between markers. The veteran defender rose like a salmon jumping upstream, his header powerful and true, but Pavlenka was there again, palming it away with both hands. The rebound fell kindly for Bremen and Bargfrede cleared it with a powerful boot up the field.

[15]

Leverkusen began to squeeze. The red shirts hunted in packs, nudging Bremen backwards a metre at a time until the hosts were pinned inside their own third. Diaby drew two, then three green shirts with a twitch of his hips and a feint toward the by-line. When Gebre Selassie finally lunged, studs raking turf, Diaby felt the clip at his ankle, spun clear of the contact, and tumbled along the paint of the box.

The whistle cracked through the stillness almost immediately as the referee gave a freekick and did not forget to warn the defender. "Dangerous territory, this," Derek Rae's voice rose a notch. "Just outside the area—tailor-made for a teasing delivery."

"Demirbay country," Stewart Robson added. "He's got that whip you can't defend if the timing's right."