

Greatest 411

Chapter 411 Transfer Market Situation The following day, the time showed 11:45 AM when Zachary set foot in Pullman Kinshasa Grand Hotel's restaurant for his only scheduled meeting before he returned to Europe.

He settled down at a table by the window in the far corner and started taking in the sights around him. The next moment, his eyes lit up as he was really impressed by the aesthetics around him.

The decorations around the place were elegant and extravagant, especially with the eye-catching paintings and expensive antiques adorning the walls. The luxurious dining table sets, neatly arranged in the restaurant, were like a work of art atop the beautiful woolen carpets covering a sizeable fraction of the tiled floor. And as a final touch to the entire set-up, soft classic music, at just the right volume, played in the background, soothing the ears of the customers savoring their meals.

"Good morning, sir," a uniformed waiter said after approaching his table.

"Good morning," Zachary replied, nodding at the waiter.

"Welcome to the Pullman Kinshasa Grand Hotel's restaurant," the waiter said. "We have a variety of dishes (both local and foreign) available for your enjoyment here in our restaurant. Please look at the menu and see if any of our dishes catches your eye." He placed three menu booklets of considerable volume on the table in front of Zachary.

"Thank you," Zachary said, picking up one of the menu booklets. "But I won't order any food for now as I'm still waiting for someone. For the moment, give me lemon juice and water. Then, when the person I'm waiting for arrives, I'll order the dishes."

The waiter nodded with a smile. "That's very okay. You can feel at home while waiting for your friend to arrive. Let me get you your water and lemon juice for the moment. It'll only take five minutes."

"Thank you for your service," Zachary said, smiling.

"It's my pleasure," the waiter said with a slight bow. He then stepped away from the table to prepare the orders.

Zachary ignored everything around him and immediately turned his focus to his phone. He started browsing the trending sports news around Europe to pass the time.

The news of Germany winning the 2014 World Cup was no longer a hot topic. Instead, it was the speculations and confirmations of transfer activity between the various top clubs in Europe that were making waves on the internet. So, when Zachary opened his phone browser, he immediately chanced upon the very same subject.

Barcelona had just completed the highest profile transfer of the summer so far. After months of negotiations with Liverpool, they had finally managed to land Luis Suárez for a whopping fee of 94 million Euros. Details on the internet even hinted at Barcelona promising to pay the phenomenal striker a staggering salary of 12.5 million Euros per year to land his signature. As far as most credible sports journalists were concerned, Luis Suarez was sure to become the most expensive signing of the summer.

"The events are similar to the ones of my previous life," Zachary thought. "It seems there weren't many changes caused by my going back in time."

Zachary smiled as he scrolled down the page to take in more headlines. There were rumors of James Rodríguez, the Colombian playmaker, agreeing on personal terms with Real Madrid. Reports claimed that his move was almost imminent, and he would leave AS Monaco within a few weeks.

Then, there were rumors of Angel Di María agreeing to join Manchester United and other speculations about Mario Balotelli's agent arriving in England to negotiate his move to Liverpool. There was also confirmation of Alexis Sanchez and Diego Costa completing their moves to Arsenal and Chelsea, respectively.

After the World Cup final, transfer activity between top clubs was in full bloom. So, many more transfer rumors were floating around on the internet as sports journalists and netizens speculated about the subsequent high-profile signings. But what finally caught Zachary's attention the most were speculations about himself.

"Chelsea, Tottenham, and Juventus are still in the lead to sign Rosenborg's wonder kid - Zachary Bemba," a headline read. "Forget Luis Suárez joining Barcelona for a record summer transfer fee. The saga that has been tickling at our nerves is the one concerning Zachary Bemba. I believe I speak for all football lovers in Europe when I say that we are very eager to know Zachary Bemba's next club when he finally leaves Rosenborg."

"Even before the World Cup, various reports had already linked the young playmaker to top European clubs like Manchester United, Chelsea, PSG, Tottenham, and Juventus," the article read on. "But due to unexpected circumstances that saw the young playmaker lose a close relative, negotiations concerning his move out of Rosenborg came to a standstill. But worry not, football lovers! There's finally a breakthrough."

"A reliable source has recently revealed that his agent is already meeting parties from some interested clubs to arrange the final details of Zachary's transfer. And the same reliable source has also disclosed that the leading clubs in the race to acquire Zachary's signature this summer are Chelsea, Juventus, and Tottenham. All three clubs have already tabled 70-plus million Euro offers to land the player from Rosenborg. As long as one of the three clubs agrees on personal terms with Zachary, we'll finally get to know his next club..."

Zachary stopped reading the article and creased his brows as the waiter brought his bottled water and juice over. He thanked and sent him away before leaning forward and taking a sip of his lemon juice. At the same time, his mind was wandering. He was even a bit confused.

Aside from Tottenham and Juventus, he'd instructed Emily to disregard all the offers from the other clubs. But now, on reading the news on the internet, there were rumors strongly linking him to Chelsea Football Club. An even more baffling fact was that all those speculations were on reliable websites like The Daily Mirror and Sky Sports News. They all seemed sure that he was considering a move to Chelsea.

"What's happening?" Zachary wondered while continuing to sip his juice. "Is it José Mourinho playing mind games, or is this a move by Emily to strengthen our position during negotiations on personal terms? I should call Emily and get to the bottom of this, especially since I don't want to end up playing for Chelsea."

He immediately started searching for Emily's number in his phone book. He was ready to make a call to his agent to inquire about the exact details concerning his transfer out of Rosenborg. But suddenly, a familiar voice interrupted him, causing him to halt his actions.

Chapter 412 Meeting "Hello, Zachary," a tall and elegant mature African lady spoke in French after approaching his table. She was beautiful, with a pretty face and long braided hair that hung rich and black about her proud shoulders. A soft and warm smile outlined her facial features as she glanced expectantly at Zachary.

"Hello, and good afternoon," Zachary replied, standing up. He couldn't stop his heartbeat from quickening as it was only his second meeting with Céleste Kouame, the lady who was his biological mother. "Welcome!" He extended his hand across the table for a handshake.

The woman seemed disappointed by Zachary's formality. But she still took his hand for a firm handshake. "It's really nice to see you, my dear Zachary. I've been looking forward to this day, like forever."

"Oh!" Zachary said, smiling awkwardly. He was at a loss for words, and his eyes naturally floated towards another younger lady standing a step behind the older woman. The girl was quite tall and good-looking, with chic short black hair and large brown eyes that made her seem like the most amiable of persons.

Céleste's gaze lit up when she noticed Zachary's gaze. She pulled the younger girl forward by the arm and said, "This young girl is Natasha Kone, my second daughter. She insisted on coming with me when I mentioned that I was heading out to meet you. Natasha! Say hi to Zachary."

"Hi," the younger girl said, smiling awkwardly. She seemed a bit nervous as she extended her hand from across the table.

"Hi," Zachary replied, smiling and taking her hand. "It's nice to meet you, Natasha."

The younger girl's face lit up, her brown eyes glittering. But she didn't say anything else. Instead, she stepped back and stood a step behind her mother like her shadow.

An awkward silence descended on the table for a few seconds until Céleste suggested, "Let's sit down before we continue."

"Oh! Indeed let's sit down and talk," Zachary agreed.

With that said, their group took up their seats at each side of the table. Then, they ordered lunch and drinks before continuing their awkward excuse of a discussion.

Zachary felt like the time was moving at a snail's pace. His emotions were complicated as he didn't feel much of a connection with the people at his table. But he remained patient and listened to the stories narrated by his biological mother.

He soon confirmed that she had initially been a native of the Ivory Coast, the African country also known as Côte d'Ivoire. But ten years ago, she landed a job in Brussels, Belgium, and moved there with her two daughters. What surprised Zachary the most was that she was a doctor by profession. He couldn't help but wonder how she got together in the first place with his dad, who was a budding musician before his passing.

The minutes trickled by, and then their orders arrived while they were still in the middle of their discussion. Waiters soon placed plates and bowls of African food, including matoke, steamed potatoes, goat stew, and vegetables. They naturally slowed their conversation as they diverted some attention to the food.

From there on, the minutes seemed to move forward quickly as they ate almost in silence. Only occasionally would Céleste ask a question. But Zachary would respond with a simple yes or no, or a precise and short answer before returning his attention to his plate. On the other hand, the younger girl, Natasha, remained silent the entire time — without attempting to butt into the conversation. Awkwardness reigned supreme, and just like that, they finally wolfed down their dessert and ended their meal.

"It was a pleasure meeting you," Zachary said after emptying his plate. "But now, I really have to go. I have got to catch a flight to Europe as soon as possible."

"Oh!" Céleste's eyes widened. "Don't you wish to talk some more?"

"I would have liked that," Zachary said. "But duty calls as my club is still in the middle of the season. So, I need to be in Europe as soon as possible."

"I see," Céleste said, sighing. "Okay, then. We wish you a safe journey. But when can we meet again?"

"You now have my contact details," Zachary said, standing up and shoving his phone into his pocket. "You can contact me every once in a while. As long as I'm not busy, we can always decide when to link up through texts."

"Okay." Céleste sighed again and glanced up at Zachary. "I have a favor to ask."

"Oh!" Zachary raised a brow. "Go on. I'm listening."

"Can I hug you? Just for a few seconds?" She asked, her eyes filled with expectation.

"That..." Zachary was taken aback. He had feared that she was about to ask for something else. "Well. That's okay." He replied after collecting himself.

Céleste's countenance lit up like a bulb as she quickly stood up. She slowly leaned forward with wide open arms.

Zachary didn't mirror her exact movements, though. He instead leaned in with the side and gave her what he could best describe as a half hug. But even then, he felt like the world had stopped on its axis while in her embrace. It was as if there was no concept of time as the background noises within the restaurant faded into nihilism.

Zachary's mind was at peace. He felt like there was something so warm, something that felt right, enveloping his soul in a warm light. He let his body sag, his muscles slowly becoming loose as he leaned in for a deeper hug.

But just then, a tremor went through his entire being, and he caught himself. His heart went on a wild caper within his chest, and he immediately stepped back from the woman's embrace. It was as if he had just sensed danger.

"I'm sorry," he quickly said to Céleste, who had almost lost her balance.

"That's okay," she replied, smiling. "Don't sweat the small stuff. I enjoyed the hug."

Zachary nodded and stepped back. "It's time for us to part as I have to catch my flight soon. I'll pay the bill while moving out. So, don't pay the second time."

"We could settle the bill if you are in a hurry," Céleste suggested.

Zachary shook his head. "I insist on paying the bill as I'm the host today. You can pay when we next meet."

Céleste smiled. "Then, I'll pay next time. Thanks for hosting us. Have a safe trip back to Europe."

"Thanks," Zachary replied, turning towards the quiet younger girl by Céleste's side. "Goodbye, Natasha. It was nice meeting you."

"Goodbye," she replied.

Zachary nodded to both of them and smiled. Without saying anything else, he stepped away from the table.

He was on his way to the counter to pay the bill. After that, he intended to head back to his room to prepare for his journey back to Europe. He had moved his plans forward and wanted to set off for London that evening.

Chapter 413 An Element from an Alternate Future Zachary settled at a table on the balcony right after returning to his hotel room. He opened his laptop and booted it up before opening his browser. Without wasting time, he began to peruse the details of the various flight offers from Kinshasa to London.

Even on such short notice, many outbound flights on the travel website matched Zachary's needs. Most were affordable and even offered by top airlines, like EgyptAir, Turkish Airlines, and Brussels Airlines. But in the end, he ignored all the other companies and settled for the relatively more expensive Air France ticket because of the airline company's reliability.

He selected a business class ticket for himself before paying with his card. After receiving the e-ticket on his phone, he shut down his laptop before dialing Emily's number.

"Hello, Zachary," Emily's voice sounded from the other end of the line as soon as the international call connected. "What's up?"

"Nothing much but the sky," Zachary replied.

Emily chuckled. "How are you doing? And how far with preparations to return to Europe?"

"I've finally finished organizing everything here in Congo," Zachary said. "I'm even about to depart for Europe. In fact, I have already booked a ticket on an Air France flight departing from Kinshasa at 8:55 PM. I should arrive at Heathrow, London, at around eight tomorrow morning."

"You're traveling today!" Emily exclaimed. "I thought you mentioned that you would travel on Friday evening!?"

"Sorry," Zachary said, his tone apologetic. "There was a change in plans. Since I've already organized everything here, I wish to focus on my football career. So, I figured that traveling back to Europe as soon as possible was the right thing to do."

"That's quite true," Emily concurred. "The only challenge is that I had already arranged the meeting with the Tottenham representatives for Saturday. Now, I need to call them and reschedule."

"Will they agree to reschedule?" Zachary asked a bit hesitantly.

"Of course, they will agree," Emily replied confidently. "They're impatient and eager to progress the transfer deal negotiations, especially after waiting two months. So, they will eagerly jump at any chance to meet you. That's your charm as a young footballer who has just helped a team from a low-tier league win the Europa League."

"Then, that's a relief," Zachary said. "You can reschedule the meeting with them and move it to tomorrow, Thursday afternoon."

"Don't worry," Emily guaranteed. "I'll call them immediately after hanging up the phone and reschedule the meeting. How long do you plan to stay in London?"

"If all goes well, two days, at most."

"Do you wish to visit me and stay at my place?" Emily inquired. "Or should I book a hotel for you?"

"I think it's best that I stay in a hotel," Zachary replied.

"Come on, Zachary," Emily intoned, sounding annoyed. "I live in a large apartment by myself. I have an empty room, which is, by the way, quite comfy. So, why should you stay in a hotel?"

Zachary was at a loss for words on hearing that. He was about to reply that there was a need to maintain professional boundaries but stopped after deliberating for a moment.

Emily had been there for him as a friend during all his hardships. She had even traveled to DR Congo and Zurich, Switzerland, to arrange treatment for his grandma months prior. So, it sounded unfair and illogical to insist on professional boundaries when he had already crossed them with her ages ago.

"Okay, then," Zachary replied in a resigned tone. "If you don't mind, I'll stay at your place."

"Yeah!" Emily's voice rose up a notch at the other end of the line. "I'll pick you up at the airport when you arrive."

"Thank you," Zachary said. "By the way, what's up with the rumors strongly linking me to Chelsea? I thought we were disregarding all clubs aside from Juventus and Tottenham!"

"Oh, that!" Emily sighed. "Those rumors are a result of Mourinho's antics. Even after rejecting to meet him several times, he has dismissed my words and hasn't given up on acquiring your signature. He has even leaked some hints to the media houses that his club is ready to splash the best deal money can offer to bring you to Stamford Bridge. He's really a stubborn man."

"I see," Zachary said.

"But you shouldn't worry about the rumors," Emily continued. "We shouldn't even discredit them as they'll benefit us when negotiating personal terms. The rumors will apply more pressure on the representatives of Juventus and Tottenham and, in so doing, force them to offer you favorable personal terms."

"Then, I'll follow your advice as always," Zachary said. "Let's ignore the rumors. I now have to say my goodbyes and start preparing for my trip. See you at Heathrow Airport tomorrow morning at eight."

"Don't worry," Emily replied. "I'll be waiting for you at the exit. Have a safe trip."

"Thanks."

After ending the call, Zachary perused the details of his e-ticket and realized that he still had about four hours to kill before his flight's check-in time. So, without any worries, he spent a few minutes organizing the contents of his suitcase before jumping into bed for an afternoon nap.

He slept deeply and only woke up to the sound of his alarm at six o'clock in the evening. He quickly took a shower before dressing up and zipping his suitcase. Finally, he looked at himself in the mirror to check if everything was in place before donning his cap and exiting his room.

After checking out of the hotel, he took a taxi to the airport. The cab driver was an expert at navigating the congested roads of Kinshasa. So, he shortened the duration of the journey by a considerable margin, and in only about an hour, they made it to the gates of N'Djili Airport.

Zachary paid the cab fare before exiting the vehicle. He then pulled his suitcase and marched into the airport, ready to check in for his flight. But after taking a few more steps through the hallways, he couldn't help but do a double take as his sharp eyes landed on an exquisite figure that was all too familiar in the deep confines of his mind.

It was a youthful African lady walking toward Zachary from the other side of the airport hallway. Her face was pretty, her smile endearing, and her figure full and hot like blazing fire. Her tight and trendy pair of denim jeans accentuated her body curves as she moved forward gracefully with a slight

sway of her hips. She was beautiful even by global standards, and wherever she passed, the gazes of several men would reflexively follow her lovely and sexy silhouette.

"It's her!" Zachary's heartbeat quickened, but only slightly. His feelings were complex as he finally set his eyes on Anita, the lady who was about to become his wife during his previous life.

A few years ago, he would have probably rushed forward to please her and catch her attention. He would have even groveled at her feet to create a chance to make her his again. But after spending years experiencing the baptism of passion, devotion, and care from Camilla, he now felt like she no longer had considerable sway over his emotions. Even though she still made his heart race, it wasn't to the extent of making him head over heels crazy. He could ignore his feelings for her — and he truly believed he could forget her with time.

"Why is she stopping?" Zachary wondered, his eyes widening the next moment. "She shouldn't know me at this point in time! Or could she have noticed my lingering gaze?" He was both surprised and perplexed when he noticed the girl stopping only a few steps away and glancing at him with a thoughtful expression.

"Excuse me, sir," she said, taking another step forward. "You look a bit familiar. Have we met before?"

Zachary shook his head. "No, we haven't. You got the wrong person." He pulled his suitcase past the lady and continued on along the hallway without looking back.

As the saying goes, intelligent people should endeavor to let sleeping dogs lie. Zachary wasn't about to allow any spark to ignite the toxic passion between him and Anita in his new life. He wasn't about to let himself fall for a lady, no matter how beautiful, when he clearly knew that she had abandoned him in another lifetime. How sure was he that history, or rather the future, wouldn't repeat itself and she would leave him again? It was a risk Zachary wasn't willing to take. So, he forced himself to walk away from the woman he loved the most during his previous life without looking back.

A few seconds later, a few fans tried to approach Zachary for autographs. But he avoided them immediately and once again looked for an airport official to help him through the airport procedures.

With the aid of the official, Zachary avoided most of the troubles, including the fans. He checked in and received his boarding pass in only a few minutes. Then, a bit later, at around 8:15 PM, the terminal gates opened, and he followed the rest of the passengers onto the airport tarmac to board the plane that would ferry him to London.

Chapter 414 In London The following morning, around nine o'clock, Zachary finally arrived in London after a good eleven hours of traveling. Heathrow Airport was as busy as he had heard in the rumors. It also had strict inspection practices, especially for those who had traveled from areas outside Europe. Thus, Zachary spent roughly forty minutes going through the rigorous airport checks and procedures before exiting the arrivals hall.

His eyes darted around, searching the crowd waiting outside the arrivals hall. The next second, his countenance lit up after he noticed Emily standing in a far corner. She was holding a sizeable light green poster depicting smiling cartoons and the words, "Welcome to London, Zachary!" It was very eye-catching within the crowd.

The corners of Zachary's lips lifted, and he beamed while holding Emily's gaze from a distance. Then, he pulled along his suitcase while slowly pushing through the crowd towards her position.

"Ta-daaaah! Welcome to London!" She said, smiling as soon as he stepped before her. She was as stunning as ever, even after donning a casual t-shirt on top of a pair of baggy jeans that morning. She pulled Zachary away from the crowd and asked, "How was your journey?"

"Very enjoyable," Zachary replied. "I slept the entire time and only woke up when the plane was touching down on the runway."

"That's very good," Emily said, glancing around and narrowing her eyes. "This isn't a good place to talk. It's very crowded. There are even some journalists mixed in with the crowd. We better head to the car immediately."

"Then, let's go." Zachary agreed.

"Do you want some help with one of those bags?" Emily asked just as they were about to set off.

"Nope. I'm good. Don't forget that I'm a professional athlete. These bags are as light as feathers within my arms."

Emily chuckled. "Then, suit yourself and continue carrying them. Okay, let's go."

Zachary smiled and followed Emily into the short-stay car park just a short distance from the arrivals hall. In less than a minute, they located Emily's ride, which was surprisingly an enormous Toyota Land Cruiser. Then, without wasting time, they loaded the luggage into the boot before taking their seats in the vehicle.

"Vroom!"

Emily started up the engine before slowly easing the Land Cruiser out of the parking space. With expert grace, she guided it out of the relatively crowded car park, and off they went, exiting the airport and joining the busy streets of London.

Zachary's eyes soon glittered with excitement and sheer curiosity as they feasted upon the sights flashing by the vehicle's window. Since it was his first time in London, he was like an ancient explorer who had just chanced upon a new land.

In silence, he admired the broad and neat avenues, the wide pavements containing the rivers of humanity, the buildings that stretched towards the blue sky, and even the roadside greenery that was a testament to the English summer. He couldn't help but sigh as everything outside the car window induced a trace of wonder within him.

"So," Emily said after a few more minutes of driving. "What's your first impression of London? Do you like it?"

"It's beautiful, and I'm impressed," Zachary replied. "But honestly, it's also not what I expected."

"Oh!" Emily said, stealing a brief glance at Zachary from her position in the driver's seat. "And what did you expect?"

"A lot of tall skyscrapers, piercing into the sky. But I have only seen a few since we started making our way through the city. I also didn't expect to see a lot of greenery beside the roads."

Emily chuckled as she continued guiding the vehicle forward. "Of course, there are areas in London with very tall skyscrapers. But we're now driving through sections of the city without them. That's why you've rarely seen any."

"Where are we heading, by the way?" Zachary asked, turning his gaze away from the window.

"We're on our way to an area called Islington," Emily replied. "That's where my apartment is, and that's where I call home."

"Islington!" Zachary mumbled. "This is my first time hearing about the place."

"If you're not a local or someone who has lived in London for some time, it would be a surprise to know all the names of the areas around the city," Emily remarked.

"True," Zachary agreed. "So, what's the plan today? When is the meeting with the Tottenham representatives?"

Emily stepped on the brakes and slowed down as the car approached a junction. "The time of the meeting is at midday," she said. "The Tottenham representatives insisted that it would be best to meet you before lunchtime. And since I knew you would already be in London, I agreed to their proposal."

"Midday!" Zachary mumbled, glancing at his watch. "That gives us roughly two hours to prepare."

"That's not correct," Emily said. "It's now 10:12 AM. By the time we reach my apartment in Islington, it'll already be 10:30 AM. So that will only give us about forty to fifty minutes to prepare. Remember, we need to account for the time to travel to the meeting venue."

"That's quite a small time window to prepare," Zachary remarked.

"Don't worry," Emily said. "We'll make it. I have already made all the arrangements on my side. After reaching my apartment, you only need to clean up and put on something presentable. Then, we'll eat breakfast and set off for the meeting venue."

"You're my guide today," Zachary said, smiling. "I'll follow all your arrangements."

Emily beamed. "You're in capable hands while in London. Nothing will go wrong."

Emily's apartment was a very comfy and neat living space on the fifth floor of a high-end building in Islington. When Zachary stepped into the place, he immediately judged that it was much more spacious than his apartment in Trondheim. It had a big living room, a kitchen, two bedrooms, two bathrooms, and a large balcony. It was obviously a pricey place to rent, especially in an expensive-to-live-in city like London.

"You live here alone?" Zachary asked as they enjoyed breakfast at a table in the kitchen. He had already settled down as a visitor in Emily's guest room and taken a quick shower. And to prepare for his meeting with the Tottenham representatives, he had donned some of his best clothes, including a white long-sleeved shirt, a pair of presentable fitting trousers, and sleek black shoes.

"Yes, I live here alone," Emily replied. She was also already in her suit and ready to head out for the meeting. "Sometimes, my younger sister can visit and stay over," she continued, punctuating her words with a sip of tea. "But that's only for a few days in a year."

"What about your boyfriend or fiancée?" Zachary asked. "Doesn't he ever come over to keep you company?"

Emily raised a brow and looked up from her breakfast. A teasing smile outlined her face as she said, "Are you trying to probe me and find out whether I'm in a relationship?"

Zachary returned her smile. "I'm just making conversation," he said, sounding defensive. "Moreover, have you realized that you know almost everything about me? But I only know a few things about you. I don't even know whether you're married or whether you have kids attending a private school somewhere. I didn't even know you had a sister until today! Isn't that weird?"

Emily chuckled softly, a sparkle in her eyes. "I've been your agent since more than three years ago. And you're just trying to get to know me better now?"

"Better late than never," Zachary replied after taking another sip of his tea. "Isn't that how the saying goes?"

"True," Emily said, smiling. "But, I'm not going to tell you anything more about myself, especially at this moment, when we're almost late for the meeting. We can visit the topic some other time."

"A reasonable proposition," Zachary agreed and took another sip of his tea. "By the way, how far is White Hart Lane Stadium from here?"

"The stadium is roughly five miles away from here," Emily responded. "But, of course, we won't meet the Tottenham representatives at the stadium. We will instead meet them at a neutral ground in one of the conference rooms of the Hilton London Angel Hotel. It's only about a mile from here. So, we only need twenty minutes to get there on foot."

"I see." Zachary nodded.

"Have you finished your breakfast," Emily asked.

"I'm almost done," Zachary said after swallowing down the last piece of the bread on his plate. "I only need two more minutes to finish my tea. Then, we can set off."

"Good." Emily nodded. "I need to warn you about a few things before we head out for the meeting. One: No matter how good the other party's offer is, don't show that you're excited until I give the go-ahead. That'll keep our position strong during the negotiations for personal terms. And two: If you come to a decision, maybe you decide to join Tottenham, run it by me first so that we can review it together."

"Noted," Zachary said.

Emily nodded and smiled. "I'm sure the negotiations for personal terms, such as a lucrative salary, more playing bonuses, a commitment to have you play consistently, and possibly a good signing bonus, will go quite well. The problems will only emerge when we begin negotiating the buy-out and release clauses in the contract."

"For instance, the other party might suggest you sign a five-year contract with their club, which includes a 120 million Euro buy-out clause. They will entice you with a high weekly wage to make you sell five years of your future to one single club. That's when you'll need to put your foot down and dismiss them. You must understand that no matter what they offer, we can't allow any club to tie you down for five years with an unreasonable buy-out clause. Otherwise, you'll face big challenges if things don't work out and you wish to leave the club. Okay?"

"Okay, I understand." Zachary nodded.

"Excellent." Emily beamed. "And remember, this is just a meeting for you to assess the sincerity of the club interested in your signature. If it so happens that you don't like the terms offered by the other party, we can always dismiss them until they raise their offers. Okay?"

"Understood."

"Good," Emily said. "Since you've finished breakfast, let's set off for the meeting. We don't want to be late."

"Okay, let's go."

Chapter 415 Negotiations As planned, Zachary and Emily met up with the Tottenham representatives at midday in one of the conference rooms of the Hilton London Angel Hotel.

The representatives were a team of three, including Mick Brown, a club scout, Vicky Sanders, an attorney, and Ledley King, a former Tottenham player, serving as the club's official spokesperson. They were very polite and enthusiastic as they welcomed Zachary to the meeting before slowly easing into the negotiations.

Ledley King, the club's official representative, immediately took center stage and presented what Tottenham could offer Zachary if he signed with them. In a few words, he conveyed that his club was willing to offer Zachary a lucrative weekly salary of 101,000 British Pounds, equating to roughly 123,000 Euros per week. The club would also reward him with a signing bonus of 5 million British pounds immediately after he signed his name on the contract. Finally, Ledley King talked about the terms

concerning player welfare, like playing bonuses and handling of player agency fees, before handing the floor to Vicky Sanders, the attorney.

Vicky Sanders was more professional than Ledley King while representing her party during the negotiations. She utilized roughly fifteen minutes to explain the breakdown of all the contract terms Tottenham was willing to offer Zachary to acquire his signature. Then, she fished two documents from a file folder placed before her and handed them to Zachary and Emily.

"Those are copies of the contract draft summarizing all the terms we've already mentioned," Vicky said, adjusting her glasses on the bridge of her nose. "We really hope that you can sign a four-year contract with Tottenham. You won't regret it. I can assure you that." She smiled amiably at Zachary.

Zachary flashed her a smile in response and picked up the document. He then exchanged a glance with Emily before starting to peruse through the terms of the contract draft.

His recently-enhanced intelligence worked like a charm, and he finished reading the nineteen-page document in about ten minutes. And surprisingly, he could remember everything, including the small details like the player's health insurance benefits. But that was not all. He had also digested the contents to some extent, even though he didn't have the required background knowledge in sports and contract law. His mind was that impressive after gaining a boost from the effects of the S-grade mental conditioning elixir.

"As Emily predicted," Zachary thought, "the buy-out clause is really a problem within the contract."

Tottenham wanted him to sign a four-year contract, tying him to the London-based club with a buy-out clause of 110 million British Pounds. In other words, any club wishing to sign him before his contract period ended would have to pay that hefty amount to Tottenham to kick-start the transfer negotiations. Or he would have to pay the amount himself — to buy himself out of a contract with Tottenham and become a free agent without having a just cause to do so. As far as he was concerned, the clause was like a strong chain fastening him to Tottenham for four years.

"Zachary!" Emily said from beside him after a few more minutes. She leaned over and pointed at the buy-out clause on her copy of the contract document. "What did I say? The buy-out clause is indeed unreasonable." She spoke in an audible voice, clearly not wishing to hide her words from the people at the other end of the table.

"Indeed, 120 million Pounds is unreasonable," Zachary took her cue and agreed, without bothering to lower his voice. "What is our way forward?"

Emily sighed in response. She shook her head before glancing at the Tottenham representatives seated at the other end of the table.

"Miss Vicky and the gentlemen," she said, adjusting her posture to sit upright. "Thank you for preparing this contract. Most of the terms in the document are almost to our liking. We only need to make a few amendments to those terms, and we'll be good to go. But there is also one clause we find totally unreasonable. That is the buy-out clause. Imposing a buy-out clause amounting to 110 million British Pounds on my client is unfair and absurd simply because it will leave him at the mercy of the club."

"Let me present a scenario to clarify," Emily continued. "For instance, if you are unfair to him while he is still under contract, he won't be in a position to negotiate for better treatment. The 110 million-shackle will always chain him to the club no matter how unfairly you treat him. For that reason, we will halt all talks until your side makes considerable amendments to this buy-out clause."

Vicky Sanders, the attorney, exchanged glances with Ledley King after hearing that. They seemed to reach some tacit understanding, and she said, "Miss Emily! Mr. Zachary! We included the 110 million buy-out clause in the contract terms to look out for ourselves as a club. We only wish to discourage other clubs from trying to poach him while he's under contract. That's our only intent."

"I understand your position," Emily said, leaning back in her chair. "But still, 110 million pounds is unreasonable."

"Let's do this," Mick Brown, the scout who had remained silent the entire time, chimed in. "We'll take a step back and lower the buy-out clause fee to 98 million British Pounds. How's that, Miss Emily?"

Emily shook her head. "Still too high."

"95 million," the scout said, narrowing his eyes. "This is the least we can do. Otherwise, we would have to discuss the clause with our board members before getting back to you."

"Then, go ahead and forward the issue to your board," Emily said calmly. "The highest figure we can consider is 60 million British Pounds. Otherwise, further negotiations are off."

Mick Brown sighed, his eyes flickering with a sense of helplessness. But the next moment, he smiled and said, "Give us a day. We'll get back to you after discussing this with our board. Okay?"

"Okay," Emily readily agreed. "We can wait for a day."

Suddenly, Ledley King, the former Tottenham player, turned towards Zachary and said, "I don't understand this. If you're willing to join a club like Tottenham, why is it hard for you to show commitment to the team by agreeing to the buy-out clause? Buy-out clauses and whatnot are just some lawyer jibber-jabber. They won't affect your performance on the pitch. As long as your coach, teammates, and fans admire you, you'll be comfortable in the club. So, why are you hesitating when I'm sure you'll do great at Tottenham? Why aren't you accepting the offer when I'm sure that our coach and fans will treasure you like the rarest of gems on the team?"

Zachary was at a loss for words. He smiled awkwardly before turning to Emily for help.

"Mr. King," Emily said, taking the cue from Zachary. "Contracts are there to provide clarity in business relationships between two parties. They serve as a record of commitments for both parties. So, we can't just take them lightly or dismiss them as lawyer jibber-jabber. Otherwise, we'll find ourselves in the middle of conflicts in the future."

Ledley King shook his head in response and said nothing else.

"So, I guess that marks the end of our meeting today," Emily said, her tone conclusive. "We'll continue discussions after you finish discussing the buy-out clause issue with your board."

"That's right," Vicky said, nodding. "Give us one day. We'll get back to you."

"Okay, then," Emily intoned, smiling and standing up. "It was a pleasure meeting you all, although we didn't agree on some issues. Let's hope that we'll have more productive negotiations tomorrow."

"I'm sure we will," Vicky Sanders said, mirroring Emily and standing up. "After discussing with our board, negotiations will move forward quickly."

With that said, the two parties shook hands before exchanging some small talk and ending the meeting. They then went their own ways after exchanging contacts.

Zachary followed Emily out of the hotel and onto the wide streets of London after the meeting. He immediately donned his shades to protect his eyes from the rays of the blazing afternoon sun.

"So," he said, matching Emily's step on the sidewalk. "Do you think they'll agree to lower the buy-out clause fee to sixty million?"

"I think they will," Emily said confidently. "They shouldn't be that dumb to let a player of your caliber slip through their fingers just for a single unreasonable clause. That's the source of my confidence during these negotiations for personal terms."

"I see," Zachary said, slowing down his steps as they approached a junction. "But aside from the buy-out clause, all the other terms were favorable. They are even willing to make me their second highest player on their roster."

"But we have got to push for more," Emily said as they halted before a junction. "We can't allow them—"

She stopped midsentence as a man appeared like a specter and stood before them. His smile was warm, and he looked like the perfect gentleman in his sleek blue suit. Zachary immediately judged that he shouldn't be a petty thief or criminal.

"Miss Emily! What a very nice coincidence!" The stranger exclaimed, his words colored by a heavy accent.

"Mr. Stefano Morganti!" Emily exclaimed back. "What are you doing here? And don't give me the 'it's a coincidence' bullshit."

"Honestly, I chased after you guys when you left the hotel," the man admitted, a polite smile never leaving his face. He then turned to Zachary. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Zachary. How are you doing?"

"I'm doing okay," Zachary replied, smiling back. He was finding the whole situation before him a bit funny. He turned to Emily and asked, "Is he your boyfriend?"

"Hahaha!" Emily let out a sarcastic laugh. "How can this dork be my boyfriend? He's a professional football agent working for Juventus."

"An agent working for Juventus!" Zachary's eyes widened. "Was he following us the entire time?"

"Most probably," Emily answered.

"Guys," the stranger said, still smiling. "Don't talk about me as if I'm not here. I'm only here to request fifteen minutes of your time. Just give us fifteen minutes of your time. If we fail to convince you to choose Juventus over Tottenham, we'll never bother you again."

"We?" Emily narrowed her eyes. "Who's we? Are there others from Turin with you here?"

"Yes, they are waiting in a private booth of a nearby cafe," the man replied. "To show our sincerity, the director even came himself."

"The football director of Juventus is also here!" Emily's expression turned strange. "How crazy are you guys? Was he also stalking us?"

The man grinned. "We need only fifteen minutes. Give us a chance, and we'll offer you a deal you can't refuse in those fifteen minutes."

"Fifteen minutes?" Emily glanced questioningly at Zachary.

Zachary nodded in response.

"Okay, fifteen minutes it is," Emily said.

The man's grin widened even further. "Excellent! Just follow me. I'll take you to meet my colleagues."

Chapter 416 The Sincerity of Juventus Zachary and Emily followed Mr. Stefano Morganti along the street until they arrived in front of a small Italian cafe with an exterior painted in green, red, and white colors. Its name was Cafe La Divina, and it just looked like a typical exotic food eatery, where you would often find many people, especially during lunch hours.

Emily narrowed her eyes and asked, "Are you sure that we should be having a confidential business discussion in such a cafe? Aren't we supposed to hold our meeting somewhere more private?"

"Don't worry, my dear lady," Mr. Stefano said amiably with a smile. "Our team has already considered all those factors. Go ahead and step into the cafe. You'll understand what I mean." Without waiting for Emily to say anything else, he held the door open for her and Zachary.

"Interesting," Zachary said, exchanging a glance with Emily. They reached a tacit understanding and immediately entered the cafe.

Zachary's eyes lit up on stepping inside. Through the large glass window that welcomed the passage of the light, the almost empty cafe was alive with the vibrant hues of the afternoon. Its interior was homely and colorful, with various paintings and unique ornaments adorning the walls. Zachary even spotted a toy car and a tiny scooter among the decorations on the walls.

"Nice," Emily remarked as she glanced around. "You booked the entire place for our meeting."

"Of course, we had to," Mr. Stefano said matter-of-factly. He closed the door to shut out the noise from the streets as his smile glowed even brighter. "Now, we have some privacy. Come; I will introduce you to the rest of my colleagues."

With that said, they started moving, and a few more strides brought them to a table at the far corner of the almost empty cafe. At that table sat two silent gentlemen, who had remained quiet and composed even after laying their eyes on Zachary and Emily.

"Mr. Zachary Bemba!" The ever-smiling Mr. Stefano said to break the ice. "Unlike Emily, it's your first time meeting any of us. So, let me do the honors and introduce you to my colleagues."

He walked around the table and patted the shoulder of a stern-looking gentleman with sharp eyes and a prominent beard. "This one here is Fabio Paratici, our sporting director. Don't get intimidated by how fierce he looks. He is quite a friendly guy. If you get to know him, you'll notice that he's pretty much an easy-going person."

Fabio Paratici chuckled after hearing the way his colleague had introduced him. His stern countenance somehow softened as he stood up and extended his arm from across the table. "It's a great pleasure to meet you, Mr. Zachary Bemba," he said. "I hope this meeting marks the beginning of a long-term friendship between our parties."

Zachary smiled and took his hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you too, Mr. Fabio Paratici," he said. "Thanks for having us, and I look forward to the negotiations between our parties."

"What did I say?" Mr. Stefano chimed in with a smile. He glanced at Zachary and asked, "Don't you already find him a friendly fella?"

Zachary just smiled in response. He was at a loss for how to keep up with the eccentric Italian.

"Okay, okay," Stefano said and stepped towards the other older gentleman at the table. "This guy here is our attorney. He goes by the name Federico Delfini. You don't have to worry too much about him. He's only here to help us through the complicated contract mumbo-jumbo."

The older gentleman laughed in response. He also stood up with grace and extended his hand to Zachary. "It's nice to meet you, Zachary."

"Nice to meet you too, Mr. Delfini," Zachary replied, taking the attorney's hand for a firm handshake.

"I guess we are all acquainted with the lovely Miss Emily," Mr. Stefano intoned. "So, there's no need for me to introduce her? Isn't that right, Miss Emily?"

Emily nodded and took the ball in her hands. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Paratici and Mr. Delfini," she said, extending her hand to the two gentlemen. "Let's have a pleasant discussion."

"Indeed," Fabio said, smiling and shaking her hand, "It's a pleasure to meet you, too, Miss Emily Anderson. I have heard a lot of good things about you. Let's have a pleasurable discussion." The sporting director then stepped back and allowed his club's attorney to exchange handshakes with Emily.

"Now that the necessary introductions are over," Mr. Stefano chipped in again after the others took their seats, "Let me also take this rare opportunity to introduce myself. I go by the name Stefano Morganti. I'm a professional football agent based mainly in Italy. I'm now representing Juventus to negotiate a deal between our two parties."

"Mr. Stefano Morganti," Emily suddenly said, her tone brisk. "You asked for fifteen minutes. Four minutes have already elapsed."

"Damn my big mouth," Mr. Stefano said, grinning and turning towards his colleagues from Turin. "Fabio! Mr. Delfini! The floor is now yours. Let's convince our guests here in less than ten minutes."

Fabio Paratici, the sporting director of Juventus, nodded and faced Zachary. "Zachary," he said. "We're very short on time. So, we're not going to overcomplicate these negotiations with lengthy presentations."

"All I can assure you is that my club needs you," he continued, his exotic accent heavily coloring his words. "We really hope that you sign with us. I'm a hundred percent confident that I speak for everyone at Juventus, including our new head coach, Massimiliano Allegri, our president, Andrea Agnelli, and all our fans, when I say that Juventus needs you. As long as you sign with us, we'll do our best to accommodate all your requirements. That's a promise, and that's all I have to say for now."

Mr. Stefano Morganti smiled and turned toward the quiet older attorney. "Mr. Delfini," he said, "Can you pass two copies of the contract draft to our two guests?"

"Sure," Federico Delfini, the attorney, readily agreed. Without losing a second, he opened his briefcase and fished out two documents. Then, he smiled and passed them over to Emily and Zachary.

"Excellent!" Mr. Stefano Morganti's eyes flickered with joy as he glanced at his watch. "I still have about ten minutes. That should be enough."

"No, you only have eight minutes," Emily corrected, leaning forward and picking up the copy of the contract draft before her.

"Can't you even let that pass?" Mr. Stefano asked.

"You now have seven minutes," Emily stated, tuning her gaze onto the contract in her hands.

"Damn!" Mr. Stefano cursed. But his smile was still as bright as the noon sun as he turned towards Zachary. "Mr. Zachary Bemba! I'll summarize all the terms Juventus can offer to convince you to choose our side. Please, listen carefully."

Zachary leaned back in his seat and nodded to give him the go-ahead.

Chapter 417 A Hard-to-Refuse Offer "First of all," Mr. Stefano intoned, "Let's start with the salary. Juventus is willing to offer you a weekly wage of 159,000 Euros if you agree to sign a four-year contract with us. That means that you will potentially earn 636,000 Euros per month and roughly 7.63 million Euros per year if you join Juventus. You'll also become the highest-paid player on our roster next season."

"On top of the salary, Juventus will also pay you a sum of 69,000 Euros for every appearance you make for the club in an official competitive match. And if it so happens that you hit 40 goals and 30 assists in all competitions in a season, the club will award you an additional 2 million Euros. In brief, if you could meet all clauses, you could earn a lucrative wage of 13.5 million Euros per year. But that's not all we're offering."

"To ensure you feel at home at the club, we'll also settle your agent's fees that we've costed at 10% of your annual salary. And to show our sincerity, we've also pushed ourselves and decided to reward you with a signing bonus of 28 million Euros."

"If you sign with us, Juventus will pay you the signing bonus money in three batches. The first portion will be 15 million, and you'll receive it within two weeks after signing the contract to join Juventus. The second batch will be 10 million, and you'll receive it in your second year under contract. And finally, the third batch will be 3 million, and you'll receive it during your third year under contract. That is our sincerity."

Zachary's heart was already racing by then. He had already realized that all the terms offered by Juventus topped those of Tottenham. Be it the weekly wage, the signing bonus, and the playing bonuses — they were all much higher than those proposed by Tottenham in the meeting earlier. As a result, his heart was starting to waver and tilt toward the side of Juventus.

He wasn't a monk or a saint. With all the money Juventus had put on the table, he couldn't just continue treating Tottenham as his priority destination. But even then, he tried to maintain a poker face as he didn't wish to put Emily in a vulnerable position during the forthcoming negotiations.

"Thank you, Stefano, for the presentation," Emily said, smiling. "I've just skimmed through the contract, and it's tempting. But there are two clauses that we find not to our liking. We would like you to amend them before we progress into further talks."

Zachary's eyes were almost widening on hearing that. He only managed to control himself to maintain his poker face after exerting all his willpower. But on the inside, he was still thinking, "Which clauses did Emily find not to our liking? Why is it that I didn't find them when I skimmed through the contract document?" He was slightly puzzled.

"Miss Emily," Mr. Stefano said, his signature sunny smile outlining his face. "Go ahead and tell us which clauses you find not to your liking."

"First and foremost," Emily answered, "We won't sign a contract containing a buy-out clause of 80 million Euros. The most we can consider is 73 million Euros. That's probably the fee you'll pay Rosenborg to acquire my client. Secondly, we would like you to raise the signing bonus. My client has to settle down in a new country and a new city after joining your club. He'll need to buy a house and organize a few things. The 28 million Euros won't be enough. My recommendation would be 35 million Euros."

A brief silence descended on the table as the facial expressions of all the gentlemen on the other side turned strange. They were probably wondering how the woman before them could spout nonsense with a straight face.

"Miss Emily," the ever-smiling Stefano said, breaking the silence. "You're really putting us in a difficult position. We presented our best offers because we didn't want to waste your time negotiating. But now you're asking for more. And a hell lot more."

"I'm just looking out for my client," Emily said, a professional smile outlining her face. "I wish for him to settle down quickly in Turin. That way, he will be able to focus and play better football. Isn't that what you people hope to see? Don't you wish to see him comfortable in Turin, scoring goals week in, week out?"

"We do," Mr. Stefano said.

"Then, we're in agreement," Emily said. "So, please do the needful."

Mr. Stefano leaned forward and planted his elbows on the table. "We can agree to amend the buy-out clause and lower it to 75 million Euros. However, raising the signing bonus is difficult. Our financial position can't allow us to offer Zachary more than 28 million."

"Then, too bad," Emily said, her tone snappy. "If you can't raise the signing bonus to an appropriate amount, further negotiations are off the table. I'm sure Mourinho and his Chelsea is willing to fork out an even higher signing bonus."

"This..." The smile on Mr. Stefano's face disappeared for the first time that afternoon. He looked at Fabio Paratici, the Juventus sporting director, for help.

Fabio Paratici cleared his voice and locked gazes with Emily. "I know that you're looking out for your client. But you're also putting us in a difficult position. If we pay more money to Zachary, we'll not manage to meet the fair play rules. That's our difficulty. But to show our sincerity, we can still push ourselves and do all we can to take a step back. Let's meet in the middle and agree on a buy-out clause fee of 75 million and a signing bonus of 31 million. That is the highest we can offer."

"32 million," Emily said. "32 million as the signing bonus and 75 million as the buy-out clause fee. Then, we can reach an initial agreement here and now before we leave. We would only need to iron out some minor details in the contract before concluding negotiations quickly. It's your call.

Fabio leaned back into his seat and shook his head with helplessness. "Okay, 32 million it is," he said, seeming defeated. "But we have to put our initial agreement into writing right away. Additionally, Zachary has to communicate to the public through social media that he has reached a preliminary agreement with us. He has to tell relevant parties that he's about to become our player."

Emily tilted her head to face Zachary, her gaze questioning. "Honestly, what do you think?" She asked, softening her voice. "Is this a good deal? Do you agree to play for Juventus next season? Don't mind the gentlemen across the table and speak your mind. I'll support you even if you want to say no to this deal."

Zachary's thoughts were already crystal clear at that moment. He exhaled lightly and faced the gentlemen across the table. "I have seen your sincerity," he said, smiling. "So, I'm very willing to join your club next season. But that's, of course, after ironing out the minor details in the contract that Emily mentioned."

"Yeah!" Mr. Stefano Morganti was the first to jump up and celebrate. "Very nice choice, Zachary. Welcome to Juventus." He extended his hand from across the table.

Zachary stood up and took his hand. "Thank you, Mr. Stefano."

After that, Zachary and Emily shook hands with Fabio Paratici, the Juventus sporting director, and Federico Delfini, the attorney, to seal the deal. They then ordered lunch and drinks to celebrate the beginning of their business relationship.

Chapter 418: Plans and Media Attention
Later that evening, after enjoying a lavish English dinner, Zachary sat with Emily on her apartment's balcony to enjoy a celebratory drink. From their high vantage point, their faces glowed with excitement as they appreciated the impressive view of Islington under a night sky filled with bright stars. They couldn't contain their excitement after sealing a lucrative deal with Juventus.

"Emily!" Zachary sighed, sipping on his lemon juice. "You're really a ruthless agent. Securing 32 million Euros as a signing bonus! You were even about to make the sporting director cry."

"You're wrong about that," Emily said after sipping her red wine. Her face was rosy, her blue eyes glowing with cheerfulness, and her smile bright. She was obviously enjoying herself in Zachary's company. "That sporting director is a very shrewd man," she continued. "He was only putting on an act to ensure I didn't ask for more money. I feel that the 32 million we agreed upon was still two or three million Euros shy of his bottom line."

"Is that so?" Zachary was surprised. "And here I thought the man was in dire straits, fighting to make ends meet."

Emily chuckled. "That's the deceitfulness that usually transpires around negotiation tables. But the good thing is that we still forced a good deal out of him."

Zachary nodded, creasing a brow. "So, now that we've agreed to Juventus' offer, what do we do about the Tottenham people? We promised to meet them tomorrow."

"You ignore them," Emily said matter-of-factly. "As for me, I'll communicate to them tomorrow early morning and tell them that the deal is off. Don't feel sorry for them. You gave them an opportunity, but they failed to take it due to some bureaucratic procedures. They only have themselves to blame for missing out on your signature."

Zachary nodded again. He concentrated on sipping his juice while admiring the activities on the streets of Islington, spread out below the balcony. All the while, his thoughts whirled at fast speeds as various plans came together in his mind.

Finally, he had chosen his next club. He now had to focus on moving from Trondheim and settling in Turin within the next few weeks. In between, he also had to consume the S-grade vitality-enhancing elixir so as to boost his body fitness. Then, he had to train arduously to fight off the elixir's potent side effects before playing in the highly-competitive Serie A. His schedule was sure to be a hell-lot-busier over the upcoming few weeks.

"So, when do you plan to return to Trondheim?" Emily suddenly asked to break the brief period of silence on the balcony.

"Is there anything more you need me to do here in London?" Zachary fired back. "Am I needed during the upcoming talks with the Juventus attorneys and agents?"

"No," Emily replied. "We're now going to start talks to revise and iron out the minor details in the contract. They involve a lot of lawyer jibber-jabber, as Mr. King would say. They only require attorneys of our two parties to be present."

"So, when will I next be needed?" Zachary asked.

"We'll only require your presence when the final contract is ready for signing," Emily answered. "That will probably be three days later, on Monday. We'll probably have to travel to Turin and sign the contract there. What will follow will be meeting your coaches and club staff for the first time. After that, your unveiling ceremony will take place — and you can finally start settling down in the new city of Turin."

Zachary leaned forward and took another sip of his juice. "Considering all that," he said, "I have to return to Trondheim tomorrow morning to commence preparations. Otherwise, I might not be ready to move to Turin on Monday."

"You don't have to rush," Emily advised. "You can wait until we sign the contract before you shift to Turin. Don't forget that you'll have to purchase or rent a house before moving. The next three days won't be enough for that."

Zachary nodded and sighed. "I still have to return to Trondheim tomorrow morning. I have been away from the club for two months. I must return and say goodbye to a few people, especially my coaches, teammates, and friends. I also have to talk to my girlfriend about my move to Juventus. I don't know how she'll take it. I wonder whether she'll agree to move with me to Turin. There is just a lot of stuff to take care of."

"Don't worry," Emily said. "Everything will fall in place naturally. And before we forget, we must also inform Kristin to start preparing to move to Turin. Even though you're shifting out of Trondheim, she still wants to remain your publicity secretary."

"I know," Zachary replied. "I'll talk to her when I return to Trondheim."

"Good," Emily said. "Now that we've finished making plans for the next few days, you can make that official post, informing the public that you have agreed to join Juventus. We don't want to rile the Juventus representatives by failing to keep our promises."

"Sorry! I had already forgotten about that," Zachary said, smiling awkwardly. "Let me post the message on my Twitter and Instagram accounts now."

"Go ahead," Emily encouraged. "Make sure that you post some evidence to show that you met with the Juventus representatives today. The pictures Stefano took with your phone after the meeting will do wonders."

Zachary nodded and scooped up his phone from the table before him. He unlocked it before opening his Twitter app.

With expert ease, he quickly uploaded a picture portraying Emily, Mr. Fabio Paratici, the Juventus sporting director, Mr. Federico Delfini, the attorney, and himself on the account. Then, he typed the comment, "Happy to reach an agreement with Juventus today afternoon," before tapping the tweet button. He repeated the same process and uploaded the same picture and message on his Instagram account before placing the phone back on the table. He'd finally fulfilled the Juventus party's requirement of communicating to the public that he'd reached an agreement with them.

"You're as brief as ever," Emily commented from the side while glancing at her phone's screen. "You posted only a picture and a single sentence!"

"But the post says all there is to say," Zachary argued. "It mentions that I have agreed to join Juventus and provides proof of our meeting with the people from Turin."

Emily smiled. "True. And the post is just like you, efficient and to the point. By the way, what time do you wish to depart from London tomorrow?"

"6:00 AM would be a good time to depart," Zachary said. "I want to be in Trondheim by ten in the morning."

"Then, you should sleep early today," Emily suggested. "I'll take you to the airport tomorrow morning."

"Thanks." Zachary beamed.

The following morning, Zachary's two posts were trending on Twitter and Instagram. His short message about reaching an agreement with Juventus had caused the internet to explode with vibrant activity.

A large fraction of Zachary's 2.4 million followers on Twitter and Instagram reacted to his posts, hoping to get the juicy details of his agreement with Juventus. But, of course, Zachary couldn't offer any replies to them since he was seldom on social media. So, the task fell upon Kristin, the unfortunate publicity secretary, who spent the entire morning answering tweets with the limited information she possessed about the deal.

Then, just as Kristin was about to lose her head, both Rosenborg and Juventus posted official statements about the deal on their websites and Twitter accounts. In as few words as possible, they stated that they had reached an agreement concerning Zachary Bemba, and he would be joining Juventus for a 74 million Euro fee, plus a few add-ons. They even mentioned that representatives from the two clubs would meet that afternoon to sign the associated contracts.

"BOOM!"

The two statements were explosive, like tonnes of dynamite ignited on the internet. The netizens and media houses quickly fed on the new information and reposted it, causing it to propagate far and wide on the global web.

Before long, headlines about Zachary joining Juventus became a trending topic on the internet, forcing even the news of Luis Suarez's already-completed transfer to Barcelona to fade into the background. And soon, even those as far as South America and Australia already knew that Juventus had signed Zachary Bemba, the nineteen-year-old wonder kid from Rosenborg.

It was then that many football pundits began reacting to Zachary's move. They took to the various sports news platforms and started predicting how Zachary might fare after joining Juventus.

"Mark my words," Charles Adams, a reputable sports journalist, said during an interview with ESPN. "Zachary has a high chance of becoming a flop at Juventus."

"Aren't you saying all this because you're a Tottenham fan?" Emilia Vasquez, the ESPN presenter, questioned with a smile. "Aren't you just bitter because Zachary abruptly ditched Tottenham and signed for Juventus?"

"That's not the reason," Charles responded, glancing into the camera. "I made this prediction without any bias. It's only based on my professional judgment as an experienced sports journalist."

"Then, please clarify," Emilia Vasquez pressed, a smile still outlining her face. "Tell us why you think Zachary Bemba will become a flop at Juventus?"

"The answer is simple," Charles Adams responded. "The Italian football competitions are more competitive than any league Zachary has ever experienced. And I know people will argue that Zachary has already performed incredibly well in the Europa League. He has broken all records and so on. But that isn't enough to guarantee that he will perform when he joins Juventus."

"Last season, he was a new player in the Europa League. Many coaches and players weren't aware of him because he was from a small club in a low-tier league. So, they couldn't prepare immaculate countermeasures against him. But now that he has joined an Italian giant, opponents will study him with a targeted obsession. They will develop countermeasures to defend and guard against him. That's where his problems will begin."

"And let's not forget that he might not be able to make Juventus' starting line-up in a long time. With Pirlo, Vidal, Pogba, and Claudio Marchisio on the squad, he'll find it hard to secure a number on the starting eleven. And due to his limited experience, not securing a number will frustrate him and mess up his focus. What will follow will be him performing poorly on the pitch."

"You sound like a prophet," Emilia Vasquez commented.

"Not at all," Charles Adams said, shaking his head. "I'm no prophet, but just a sports analyst making a prediction with the information I have."

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Chapter 419: Back to Trondheim When Zachary arrived in Trondheim that morning, the news about his decision to join Juventus had already spread far and wide. Even the busy airport workers were already privy to the information that he was about to become a player for the Italian giants. They kept stealing glances at him as he went through the airport procedures.

Zachary, of course, chose to ignore them. He picked up his luggage and quickly exited the airport. After avoiding a few reporters who wanted to interview him, he boarded a taxi and headed to his apartment in StjØrdalsveien.

Thirty-five minutes later, he paid the cab driver in front of his apartment building. Then, he pulled his luggage before making his way to the front entrance of the place he had called home for more than a year.

Complicated feelings rose within him as he ascended the stairs. He couldn't help but recall how happy he was when he had first paid the booking fee and rent for the apartment. At that time, he'd just graduated from the academy. His heart had been full of anticipation and excitement as he had been about to become a Rosenborg player. But now, just after about a year and seven months, he was about to say goodbye to Rosenborg, the same club he could only dream about joining during his previous life. The whole progress of events gave him a surreal feeling — but also caused him to swell with pride as he continued making his way up the stairs.

"Zachary!" A familiar voice exclaimed, breaking his thought process as he reached the fourth floor. "Welcome back to Trondheim. It has been long."

"Kristin!" Zachary exclaimed back, looking towards the entrance of the apartment on the fourth floor. He took a few steps toward the charming girl he had first met in Lubumbashi, DR Congo, four years ago. "Yes, it has been more than two months since we met. How are you doing?"

"I'm doing fine," she replied with a smile. "Come inside. I will make you something to drink." She pushed the door open and pointed toward the inside of her apartment.

"Okay." Zachary nodded and pulled his suitcase through the doorway. He figured he could just conclude his talk with Kristin before ascending the stairs and going to his apartment.

"So, can I get you some coffee, or can I get you some milk and cereal?" Kristin asked, closing the door behind her. The natural lighting in the room cast a rosy hue upon her blonde hair and face, making her seem like a fairy who had just descended to Planet Earth.

"Only a coffee will do," Zachary replied, smiling at her. He positioned his suitcase by the door and settled on one of the sofas in her living room.

"Okay, I'll get you some coffee," Kristin said and went to the kitchen to prepare the hot drink. She returned five minutes later with a tray holding a cup and flask before gracefully placing it in front of Zachary.

"Thank you," Zachary said, nodding at her. Without further ado, he opened the flask and poured himself some coffee.

"So," Kristin intoned after settling on a sofa opposite Zachary, "I saw the news. You're going to Juventus!"

Zachary nodded, smiling awkwardly. "Sorry. It was an abrupt decision I made only yesterday. I couldn't inform you in advance."

"No problem," Kristin assured. "The only challenge is that you posted your decision on your official social media accounts without filling me in on the details. I could only reply vaguely to all your followers about your potential move to Juventus."

"I apologize," Zachary said. "I completely forgot about that. I'll fill you in on the details later. Speaking of which, are you ready to move to Turin with me? You previously mentioned that you wanted to continue working as my publicity secretary even after I left Trondheim. Do you still feel the same way?"

"Of course, I do," Kristin was quick to reply. "Yes, I wish to continue working as your publicity secretary. Otherwise, where would I find another lucrative job such as this?"

Zachary smiled and took a sip of his coffee. "Then, you should prepare and shift to Turin as soon as possible. You can also call Emily and remind her about renewing your contract before you move."

"Great, thank you," Kristin said, her amber-brown eyes glowing with excitement.

"You're welcome. But let me remind you that you'll have a hell-lot more responsibilities after you arrive in Turin. Now that my fame is growing, you won't just be managing my social media accounts. For instance, you'll also have to attend meetings with companies that endorse me to draft plans to advertise their products using my brand as a professional athlete. I may also require you to take care of a few other responsibilities, such as managing correspondence with my partners and top fans, scheduling appointments, and making travel arrangements. In other words, you won't just be my publicity secretary but also my personal assistant."

"I understand," she said. "I'll do my best to take up all those responsibilities."

"Then, excellent," Zachary said and sipped his coffee again. "How's your grandpa, by the way? How's he doing?"

"He's doing fine," Kristin replied, sighing. "He's also still waiting for you to make a decision about the issue he proposed. I hope you haven't forgotten yet."

"Of course not. The proposal to build a talent development center in Africa is still in my head. But I'm not ready yet. I need a few more years to prepare."

Kristin nodded, smiling. "As long as you remember, then all is fine. By the way, I'm sorry about your grandma. I couldn't be there in Congo for you. We had exams at the time, and I couldn't travel for the funeral."

"Don't worry about that. It's all in the past," Zachary said, feelings of bitterness rising within his heart. But he suppressed them the next instant and continued sipping his coffee.

An awkward silence descended upon the living room for a few seconds until Zachary spoke again. "So, when will you move to Turin?"

"At the end of next week," Kristin replied. "Is that okay?"

"That's a bit early. Why don't you consider moving around August 15th?"

"That's fine," Kristin answered. "I will move by the 15th then."

"Great." Zachary smiled and returned to sipping his coffee.

He had already researched Juventus' upcoming schedule the previous night. The Turin-based club wouldn't play any official matches before August 30th. They would only play pre-season friendlies during the rest of July and August, which Zachary wanted to miss because of some of his other plans. He wished to use the time before the start of the Serie A to train like mad and help his body acclimatize to the effects of the S-grade elixir he was about to consume. Only after that would he settle down in Turin and start to actively seek an opportunity to play a competitive game for his new club.

Thus, there was no need to push Kristin to travel to Italy when he wasn't planning to settle there until after a month. As long as she shifted before the start of the Serie A (before August 30th), everything would be fine. She would settle in her new role even before Zachary played his first official match.

Zachary said his goodbyes to Kristin after finishing his coffee. He ascended the stairs and returned to his apartment on the sixth floor.

He felt at home when he stepped into his living room. A smile framed his face as he glanced around and noticed that the entire place was like he'd left it two months ago. It was relatively tidy, and there wasn't much dust on the exposed surfaces.

Most likely, Camilla, the only other person with a key to the place, had taken the time to clean it often while he was away. And that saved him the time to sweep and mop it himself.

He unpacked his luggage and quickly took a shower. After coming out of the bathroom, he dried himself and put on a fresh set of casual clothes. Then, he returned to the living room and settled on one of his sofas before deciding to summon the system.

Immediately, the all-familiar translucent crystal-like display that was the system interface shimmered to life before him. It glowed with a blue splendor within the dimly-lit living room.

"System," Zachary called out in his mind. "I would like to consume the S-graded vitality-enhancing elixir now."

"Command received," the system AI replied. "Confirming... The user has a single dose of the S-graded vitality enhancing elixir stored in the inventory."

"The user can select the respective card in the inventory to summon the elixir. As always, the user should ensure to consume the elixir within five seconds after its removal from the system inventory. Otherwise, its effects will expire if it spends more time out of the inventory."

"Understood," Zachary replied.

He tapped on the crystal-like display to summon the S-grade vitality-enhancing elixir that looked like a miniature version of an apple. He swallowed it down in a single gulp before lying supine on the sofa. Then finally, he expelled a lungful of air to brace himself for the immediate agonizing effects of consuming the system potion.

A few seconds passed, and a refreshing sensation washed across his body, seemingly nourishing his muscles, bones, internal organs, and blood. Then, his temperature spiked abruptly, and a sore irritation assaulted his entire being. His body started trembling as more effects of the potion kicked in and strengthened his physique.

His eyes misted as he winced in agony. He felt like he was losing himself — like his body was being torn apart and put together thousands of times. But he still fought with all his willpower to maintain a clear state of mind. Then, just as he thought he could hold on until the end, the soul-tearing discomfort peaked, and a tremor jolted his body and consciousness. His eyes lost focus, and he blacked out.

Chapter 420: The Wondrous Effects of an S-Grade Elixir

Zachary shivered and awoke with a start after an indeterminable period of time. He glanced around and noticed that it was already nighttime. Darkness had already enshrouded everything in the living room, and his eyes couldn't even see a meter ahead of him. He blinked to adjust to the lack of presence of light as he pushed himself up from the sofa.

He let out a sound of disgust as he realized that his body and clothes were humid and sticky. There was even an unpleasant stench wafting about him, making him seem like a person that had slept in a garbage dump for days. "This abnormality! The vitality-enhancing elixir must have helped me expel foul substances from my body again. It's like the washing of marrow in those Wuxia fiction masterpieces. I should be healthier and more fit." A myriad of thoughts fled around Zachary's mind as he carefully made his way through the darkness, heading towards the direction of his bedroom. A second later, he managed to switch on the lights, and the house came alive with brightness. Immediately, his eyes darted around the place, taking in everything until they settled on the clock hanging on the opposite wall. "Eh! It's already 9:30 PM!" Zachary's eyes widened with surprise. He had blacked out for roughly ten hours after consuming the elixir. Even though his mental ability was already at the S - grading, he still succumbed to the effects of the system potion and passed out for almost half a day. The system's elixirs were just that potent as they increased in grade. "I better clean up first before anything else." The fishy stench wafting about him was making him quite uncomfortable. He rushed to the bathroom and took a warm shower, making sure to scrub all the filth off his body. In just a short while, he was fresh and clean. He dried himself before exiting the bathroom. As he was about to enter his bedroom, his eyes reflexively glanced at his reflection in the full-body mirror. Staring back at him was a stern-looking tall man with a head adorned by messy black hair and eyes as bright as gems. His body was like a divine artist's masterpiece, with glowing light brown skin and well-streamlined muscles that were not too pronounced to garner any attention if he was in casual clothes. But if he were to remove his shirt, people would be surprised by his prominent chest, shaped like a brick house, and his sleek six abs that stood out like tiles above his pelvis. "It seems like the system's S-grade vitality-enhancing elixir has done a lot of wonders for my body again," he thought as he turned his gaze away from the mirror and walked into the bedroom. His skin was as smooth as silk, without any blemish after his body relied on the S-grade elixir to expel numerous hidden wastes. He could even give models a run for their money even though he had never used skin care products nor gone to a dermatologist for a consultation.

"System," Zachary called out in his mind after settling on his bed. "Bring up my fitness stats right away." "Command received," the system AI replied in its apathetic voice. "Hoses physical fitness attributes will be coming up on the interface shortly." With that said, the glowing crystal-like display shimmered and appeared before Zachary. He rubbed his hands together in anticipation before starting to peruse the information portrayed on the system interface. ****

*USER STATS

->Physical Fitness (Av. Rating: S+) Balance and Coordination: S-Agility: S+ Strength: S+ Stamina: S+ Endurance Points: 87,500/88,000 (So)

Zachary nodded to himself after reading through his updated physical fitness data. He felt contented after learning that all his fitness attributes, except Balance and Coordination, had climbed from the S- to the S+ grading. The S-grade vitality-enhancing elixir was truly miraculous, and it had helped push his physical fitness to a higher rank. His confidence was surging, and he was starting to eagerly look forward to the day he made his debut for Juventus in Italy. "Now let me check out the side effects," Zachary thought and said, "System, please bring up my soccer technique attributes on the interface." "Command received," the system AI intoned. "Soccer Technique slats coming up on the interface immediately."

->Soccer Technique: (Av. Rating: A (S+)) Ball Control: A+ (S+) Dribbling Skills: A+ (S-) Passing Accuracy: 5- (So) Body Control: As (S-)

NB: The grades in the brackets represent the user's base stats or, in other words, the user's attributes before consuming the 5-grade vitality-enhancing elixir.

Zachary couldn't help but sigh after his eyes took in his soccer technique stats. As expected, his ball skills, such as ball control, dribbling, and passing accuracy, had temporarily fallen to the lower grades. Since his body had experienced an explosive growth of fitness attributes in a short period of time, he couldn't control it well yet — thus the decline in grades of his core techniques. Zachary had to train like a maniac over the next few days to master his improved body and attributes. Otherwise, he wouldn't be able to raise them back to the S-grading within a short time. But even knowing all that, he wasn't that worried. He understood that the higher his fitness and game intelligence attributes, the faster he would master skills. With his S- graded stats, he would only need to train intensively for about three weeks to master his strengthened body. Then, when the Serie A commenced on August 30th, he would be able to shine in great splendor for Juventus. "It's time I ate something," Zachary quickly dismissed the system interface. He put on another set of casual clothes before heading to the kitchen and making himself some dinner. Twenty minutes later, he finished enjoying a sumptuous homemade dinner and brushed his teeth. Then, he went through his evening yoga routine before taking another shower and jumping into bed for the night.

The following day, Zachary's schedule was tight. After completing his routine morning training, he started moving around to say his goodbyes to his acquaintances. He started by visiting Coach Johansen in the morning, who was surprisingly quite supportive of his move to Juventus. Then, he linked up with his old friends, Kasongo and the Ottersons, who congratulated him upon landing a good deal in a top club. And lastly, he called upon his teammates, like Nlikael Dorsin, Nicki Nielsen, and Eric Bailly, who were already back in Trondheim for the last half of the Norwegian football season. By the time he finished saying his goodbyes to everyone, the clock hand had already pointed to six o'clock in the evening. He returned home and cleaned up before putting on an elegant pair of black trousers and a sleek blue shirt. Then, after donning his well-polished black shoes, he exited his apartment and descended the stairs. Before long, he sat snugly in his R8 GT and drove off to meet Camilla for dinner at her place. His mood was a bit jumpy as he guided the car through the busy evening traffic. His heart started to race with a mixture of anxiety and anticipation since he was about to meet Camilla for the first time in a long time. He'd last talked to her physically at his grandma's funeral two months ago. He missed her. Of course, they had communicated often by phone while he was still in DR Congo. Camilla would even video chat with him every once in a while. But that couldn't beat meeting her physically and enjoying her presence. He arrived at her apartment in Lade about ten minutes later and parked his car.

He stretched out his hand and carefully picked up the bouquet of flowers he'd bought earlier in the day from the passenger seat before exiting the vehicle. After locking the doors, he slowly ascended the stairs leading to Camilla's apartment.

On reaching her door, he breathed in deeply and knocked a couple of times. Seconds passed, but to Zachary, it seemed like a week. Then, the door opened silently, and Camilla appeared in the doorway. She was as beautiful and as titillating as ever. Her skin glowed under the dim lighting, and her emerald-green eyes shone like two bright stars in the night sky. Then, there was that casual top and the pair of tight denim shorts she had worn to emphasize her swells and dips in all the right places. She was basically a top diva hidden away in an apartment in Norway. "You're really the most beautiful girl in the world," Zachary blurted out without thinking. Her beauty had already disarmed him, and he'd even forgotten to hand her the flowers.

Camilla didn't say anything in response. She just watched Zachary's face for a few seconds before stepping forward and jumping into his embrace.

They hugged there, in front of the door leading to her apartment, without caring for anything else.° No words were exchanged for seconds. Then, in some uncanny way, their lips naturally came together, and they kissed deeply. The passion escalated, and they found themselves backtracking into the apartment. Zachary kicked the door closed with his foot and latched it with his free hand. He then placed the flowers on a nearby table before concentrating on Camilla, eager to continue progressing the R-action between them. Everything was instinctual as the tenderness bloomed between them, and soon, they were on the sofa making wild love like a pair of rabbits in heat. They caressed and explored each other with undivided attention, throwing all caution to the wind and immersing themselves in the sweet and intense throes of passion. They didn't stop until about an hour later when the smell of burnt food assaulted their nasal senses..