

LISSA SIYA JOSEPH:

THE CURIOUS MIND
CARRYING TANZANIA
BACK TO THE CHESS
OLYMPIAD



FOCUS



CURIOSITY



PURPOSE

“ Every move is a lesson.
Every challenge is a chance.
Every game brings me closer
to my dream. ”



Chapter One: A Chessboard That Did Not Exist

The first chessboard Lissa Siya Joseph remembers was not made of wood.

There was no polished table, no ticking clock and no opponent watching her from across sixty-four squares. No teacher stood beside her explaining why bishops travel diagonally, why rooks move in straight lines or why the knight behaves unlike every other piece on the board.

There was only a screen, and a curious young woman searching for a better way to use her time.

Lissa had begun questioning how much of her attention was disappearing into social media. She wanted something more meaningful: an activity that would challenge her thinking, sharpen her concentration and replace passive scrolling with deliberate learning.

“I was looking for something that could sharpen my mind,” she recalls. “I wanted something that could replace social media and too much addiction to it. I started asking myself, ‘What can I do?’ That is how I met chess.”

Nobody recruited her. Her school did not direct her towards a chess club, and her family had not introduced the game at home. Curiosity opened the door, and Lissa walked through it alone.

She began learning online from the beginning. Every piece presented a new question. Every rule had to be discovered, remembered and tested through actual games. Without a coach beside her, mistakes became part of the lesson.

A lost piece revealed what she had overlooked; a failed attack showed her what she had misunderstood; every defeat invited her to return and try again.

This was learning in its rawest form, private, imperfect and powered by persistence.

When Lissa eventually encountered a physical chessboard, she discovered that knowing the game on a screen did not immediately make the wooden board feel familiar. The pieces looked different. The position had to be understood without digital guidance, highlighted squares or automatic warnings against illegal moves.

The experience was embarrassing.

She had entered the room carrying the confidence of someone who had already played chess, only to realise that she was still a beginner in a much larger world. Yet the discomfort did not drive her away. It made her want to understand more.

That response would later become one of the defining qualities of her journey. Where others might interpret embarrassment as evidence that they do not belong, Lissa treats it as evidence that there is something left to learn.

She returned to the online board and continued playing. Match after match, chess slowly changed from an experiment into a serious interest. It gave her what she had been searching for: concentration, challenge and the satisfaction of recognising progress earned through effort.

Then one online game changed the direction of her journey.

Lissa found herself playing against another Tanzanian. During their interaction, the player was surprised to learn that the person across the digital board was a Tanzanian woman.

“Are there even girls playing chess in Tanzania?” he asked.

The question carried more weight than perhaps he intended. It revealed how unusual it still appeared to encounter Tanzanian women in competitive chess spaces. Girls were not absent from the game, but they were not yet visible enough for their presence to feel ordinary.

For Lissa, however, the encounter became a bridge. The player introduced her to Tanzania’s wider chess community, where she began meeting other players and learning about organised competitions. Until then, chess had largely existed inside her screen. Now it had names, faces, clubs, tournaments and a community she could enter.

The discovery created a new possibility. She was no longer playing only to occupy her mind or escape the endless pull of social media. She could test herself against experienced players. She could measure her development under tournament pressure. She could discover how far her curiosity might take her.

Her family watched this unexpected passion grow. They had not selected chess for her, but they recognised that she had found something important.

“We did not introduce you to this,” they told her, “but since you discovered it on your own and you are passionate about it, we believe you can do it.”

That belief mattered. Lissa was entering a sport in which she had few obvious examples around her and no conventional background to reassure her that she belonged. Her family could not make the moves for her, but they could give her the confidence to continue making them herself.

Before the national team, international arenas and the Tanzanian flag beside her name, there was simply a question: *What can I do to sharpen my mind?*

Chess became her answer.

Soon, it would ask her a much bigger question: could a self-taught beginner walk into her first serious tournament and compete for a place among Tanzania’s finest women players?

Next: Chapter Two — The Beginner Who Finished Fifth

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When Lissa Siya Joseph entered her first serious chess tournament, she carried something unusual into the competition: almost no tournament experience.

The other players appeared to understand the environment naturally. They knew the procedures, recognised one another and seemed comfortable with the tension of formal competition. Lissa, by contrast, was still finding her place in Tanzania’s chess community. She had learned the game online, initially without a coach, and was now being asked to translate that private learning into performance across a physical board.

For the first time, her ability would be measured publicly.

She wanted to win, but ambition did not silence uncertainty. As the tournament progressed, Lissa became increasingly conscious of how new she was. She was competing against players who appeared stronger, more experienced and more familiar with the pressure surrounding national competition. At times, the distance between them seemed wider than the chessboard separating their pieces.

“I felt like I was the only person who was new to the chess community,” she remembers. “There was a point when I felt I really could not do it.”

That private doubt never appeared on the results sheet. Neither did the conversations that helped her return to the board after difficult games.

Her mother and twin sister followed her progress closely. Between rounds, they encouraged her, reminded her of what she had already achieved and continued believing in her when her own confidence weakened. They could not calculate variations or rescue a difficult position, but they gave her something equally important: emotional stability.

Their confidence became a place she could borrow courage from.

Before decisive games, Lissa tried to keep her message to herself simple. She had to remain composed, continue pushing and trust that improvement was possible. There was no single dramatic move when she suddenly knew that success was within reach. Her progress came through something less cinematic but more demanding: surviving the pressure of one game, then returning to face another.

Competitive chess rarely rewards a player for how nervous, inexperienced or overwhelmed they feel. The board records only the decisions they make. A brilliant idea from a beginner counts just as much as one from a veteran, while a careless mistake receives no sympathy because the player is new.

Lissa had to learn quickly.

She finished the tournament in fifth place, level on points with the player immediately above her. For someone accustomed to measuring achievement only through trophies, fifth might have appeared unremarkable. For Lissa, it meant something much larger. She had arrived as a self-taught newcomer, uncertain whether she belonged in the room, and completed the competition among the leading players.

The result placed her on the path towards selection for Tanzania's team at the 2024 Chess Olympiad in Budapest.

"When I qualified, it was an unforgettable feeling," she says. "I felt very proud. I could not believe it because I was still very much a beginner. It was my first tournament, and I was not expecting that."

The first people she contacted were her mother and twin sister—the two people who had encouraged her after every game and continued expecting something from her even when she had begun expecting less from herself. The news did not belong to Lissa alone. It was also a reward for the quiet faith that had surrounded her throughout the competition.

Qualification transformed the meaning of her first tournament. She had not merely participated or gained experience. She had opened a route from an online chess platform to the international stage, moving with remarkable speed from teaching herself the game to earning the opportunity to represent her country.

Yet the achievement did not mean she had mastered chess. If anything, it revealed how much more there was to understand. The stronger the competition became, the

more clearly she could see the weaknesses hidden inside her play. Every victory offered confidence, but every difficult position exposed another area requiring attention.

That tension, between pride in how far she had come and awareness of how far she still had to go, would follow her to Budapest.

Lissa had entered her first tournament wondering whether she belonged.

She left it as a Tanzanian Olympian.

Next: Chapter Three — Budapest, the First Education

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When Lissa Siya Joseph arrived in Budapest for the 2024 Chess Olympiad, she carried the pride of representing Tanzania, and the unmistakable awareness that she was still new to competitive chess.

Only a short time earlier, chess had existed mainly on her screen. She had taught herself the game online, found her way into Tanzania's chess community and entered her first serious tournament with little experience of formal competition. Finishing fifth had opened an unexpected door. Now, beyond that door, stood one of the largest and most demanding stages in world chess.

The Olympiad was no longer an ambition she could imagine from a distance. It was an arena she had to enter, one move at a time.

Budapest brought together players shaped by different chess cultures. Some came from countries with established coaching systems, regular training camps and strong international competition. Many had spent years playing tournaments, studying opponents and becoming comfortable under the pressure of representing their nations.

For Lissa, the experience was both exhilarating and exposing.

Across the board, enthusiasm alone was not enough. Every position demanded accuracy. A small weakness could become a lasting disadvantage, while one careless decision could undo hours of concentration. Opponents arrived with unfamiliar styles, carefully prepared openings and the confidence of players accustomed to international competition.

The Olympiad showed Lissa how much chess can be contained within a single move.

A decision that appeared simple could depend on several possible responses. A promising attack could fail because of one overlooked defensive resource. A position that seemed quiet could conceal a tactical threat. At that level, it was not enough to

see what was happening on the board. She had to visualise what the board might look like several moves later.

Budapest therefore became more than Lissa's first Olympiad.

It became her first international classroom.

Every game taught her something different. Some positions tested her calculation; others challenged her patience, time management and emotional control. There were moments when she played with confidence and others when the difference between national competition and the world stage became impossible to ignore.

The lessons did not end when she left the playing hall. Each completed game became a record she could later revisit, an honest account of the decisions she had made under pressure. The moves showed where she had understood the position, where opportunities had escaped her and where uncertainty had interrupted her thinking.

Those games remain central to her preparation for Samarkand.

"I analyse my past games, my Olympiad games and my national games," she explains. "I start with my weaknesses."

This approach reveals how Budapest changed her. Before her first Olympiad, Lissa was learning what it meant to reach the international stage. Now, she is learning how to return as a stronger and more self-aware competitor.

Her analysis has drawn particular attention to the middlegame. She is comfortable with her opening preparation, but once the familiar sequence ends and the position begins demanding independent decisions, calculation and visualisation become more important.

"I am not worried about my openings," she says. "It is the middlegame, calculation and visualisation, that needs more attention."

The middlegame is where preparation meets uncertainty. The opening may provide a map, but eventually the player must continue without it. Plans compete, threats emerge and each move changes the logic of the position. A player must calculate variations without moving the pieces, hold possible positions in the mind and judge which future is worth pursuing.

For Lissa, recognising this weakness is not an admission of defeat. It is the beginning of deliberate improvement. Tactical exercises, endgame study and repeated analysis are helping her strengthen the parts of her game that Budapest revealed most clearly.

The Olympiad also taught her that international chess is deeply psychological. Players do not arrive at the board carrying only their openings, ratings and previous results.

They bring expectations, nerves, fatigue and fear. A strong opponent can create pressure before making a single move, especially when their style is unfamiliar and their preparation unknown.

Lissa learned that she had to manage not only the position, but also herself.

That lesson will matter in Samarkand. She will again face opponents whose backgrounds, styles and preparation may be unfamiliar. The difference is that she will no longer be experiencing the Olympiad for the first time. She now understands its scale, intensity and demands.

Her second qualification was therefore different from the first. In 2024, selection felt almost unbelievable. She had entered the national competition as a beginner and exceeded her own expectations. This time, she prepared with a clearer understanding of what qualification required, even while balancing the demands of university and chess.

“I was expecting it because I had been preparing,” she says. “It was really tough, but I was still expecting to qualify.”

Budapest did not give Lissa a completed chess education. It gave her something more useful: a clearer view of the player she was and the player she needed to become.

She went there to represent Tanzania.

She returned with a syllabus for her future.

Next: Chapter Four — Between the Laboratory and the Chessboard

Chapter Four: Between the Laboratory and the Chessboard

On some days, Lissa Siya Joseph studies what can be seen through a laboratory lens. On others, she examines positions unfolding across sixty-four squares.

Both worlds demand concentration. Both reward patience, accuracy and disciplined observation. In the laboratory, overlooking a small detail can affect an entire conclusion. On the chessboard, one unnoticed threat can change the direction of a game.

For Lissa, science and chess are not separate versions of her life. They are two expressions of the same curious mind.

She is pursuing a bachelor's degree in laboratory medicine and medical sciences while developing her career as a competitive chess player. Either path would be demanding on its own. Together, they create a daily contest for her time, attention and energy.

University brings lectures, assignments, practical sessions and examinations. Chess demands training, game analysis, tournaments and the mental preparation required

to compete under pressure. When important competitions approach, both responsibilities can begin asking for her full attention at the same time.

“The struggle I face is balancing my studies and chess preparation,” she explains. “It is very demanding.”

There is no perfect formula for maintaining that balance. Lissa has sometimes had to rearrange her academic commitments around tournaments and find additional time for preparation when her schedule was already full. Certain choices have been uncomfortable, particularly when chess and university responsibilities have collided.

Her explanation for how she continues is delivered with the kind of honesty that makes her laugh at herself.

“Obsession, I guess,” she says. “I am just obsessed with chess.”

She does not use the word casually. Chess occupies her thoughts beyond formal training sessions. Positions remain in her mind after games have ended. Mistakes invite further investigation, while a difficult tactical idea can hold her attention until she understands it. What began as an alternative to social media has become one of the organising forces of her life.

Yet her commitment to chess does not mean that her education has become unimportant. Lissa wants to continue progressing in both fields. Her ambition is not to abandon science for the chessboard or treat chess as a distraction from her professional future. She is interested in discovering how the habits developed through one discipline can strengthen her performance in the other.

Chess has taught her to remain patient when the solution is not immediately visible. It has trained her to examine several possibilities before committing to a decision and to recover when an earlier assumption proves incorrect. These habits also belong in science, where curiosity must be supported by evidence and conclusions must survive careful testing.

“Chess has really helped me in my career,” she says. “My vision is to pursue my science studies and also continue with my chess career.”

At university, Lissa established a chess club, creating a practical bridge between the two parts of her life. The club allows her to remain active in the game without waiting for national tournaments or travelling away from campus. It also gives other students an opportunity to encounter chess in an environment where they already learn, work and build friendships.

The initiative reveals another side of her character. Lissa is not interested only in becoming a stronger player herself. Teaching is one of her hidden talents, and she has already helped others learn the game, including girls who may otherwise have struggled to see chess as a space where they belong.

In teaching, she must return to the beginning: how each piece moves, how a position is understood and how confidence develops gradually. The process reminds her of the online learner she once was, discovering the game without a coach and trying to transfer what she saw on a screen onto a physical board.

Her students may see an Olympian guiding them. Lissa still sees someone learning.

That humility matters because neither science nor chess allows a person to remain comfortable for long. A new laboratory problem can challenge what seemed familiar. A stronger opponent can expose weaknesses that previous games did not reveal. Progress in both fields depends on accepting that competence is never the same as completion.

As Samarkand approaches, the pressure of balancing these worlds becomes sharper. Lissa must continue with her degree while preparing to face experienced international opponents. Training cannot simply happen when she feels inspired; it must be built into an already demanding life.

The struggle behind her selection will never appear beside her name on the tournament standings. The results will show wins, draws, losses and points. They will not show the lectures negotiated around preparation, the hours spent analysing games after academic work or the mental exhaustion of trying to honour two ambitions at once.

Lissa accepts that tension because she does not believe she must choose between becoming a scientist and becoming a stronger chess player.

In both worlds, she is learning to look beneath the surface.

In both, the smallest detail can change everything.

Next: Chapter Five — Six Points and a Ticket to Samarkand

Chapter Five: Six Points and a Ticket to Samarkand

Lissa Siya Joseph arrived at the 2026 Tanzania National Chess Championship carrying something she had not possessed before Budapest: experience.

She already knew what it felt like to represent Tanzania at a Chess Olympiad. She understood the scale of the international arena, the unforgiving nature of each move and the preparation required to compete against players shaped by stronger chess systems. Budapest had given her an education, but it had not guaranteed her a return.

To reach Samarkand, she would have to earn her place again.

This qualification campaign felt different from the first. In 2024, Lissa had entered national competition as a relatively new player, uncertain about how far her self-taught ability could carry her. Finishing fifth and reaching the Olympiad had surprised even

her. Two years later, she approached selection with clearer expectations and a deeper understanding of the pressure ahead.

“I was expecting it because I had been preparing,” she explains. “It was really tough, but I was still expecting to qualify.”

Expectation, however, offered no protection.

The 2026 national championship brought together 16 players in the women’s section for nine rounds of classical chess. Unlike a rapid tournament, where one difficult result can quickly be followed by another game, classical competition requires players to remain inside complex positions for hours. Each round tests preparation, calculation, patience and emotional endurance.

For Lissa, it was also a test of everything she had been trying to balance away from the board. She entered the championship while pursuing her bachelor’s degree and managing the competing demands of university work and chess preparation. The tension described in the previous chapter was no longer theoretical. It had followed her into a tournament where every half-point could determine whether she returned to the Olympiad.

She completed the nine rounds with six points.

The women’s championship was won by Anahi Shah with 7.5 points, followed by Neema Kisanga with seven and Bertha Mkude with 6.5. Lissa finished level on six points with Mariam Gwae. The margins separating the leading players were narrow, reflecting a national competition in which one recovered position, missed opportunity or carefully defended draw could influence the final standings.

The championship was described as record-breaking, with 40 players participating in the Open section and 16 in the women’s competition. Its significance extended beyond identifying national champions; it helped shape the teams that would represent Tanzania at the 46th FIDE Chess Olympiad in Samarkand. The Guardian reported that Lissa’s six-point performance secured her place among Tanzania’s returning Olympians.

For Lissa, qualification carried a meaning different from the wonder of her first selection.

Budapest had proved that she could reach the Olympiad. Samarkand offered an opportunity to show what she had learned since returning home.

The six points beside her name could summarise her tournament, but they could not explain it. They did not show the hours spent revisiting earlier games, the tactical exercises completed between academic responsibilities or the moments when she had to recover after making a poor decision. They could not show the emotional discipline required to begin each round without carrying the previous result onto the next board.

Chess standings compress human experience into numbers. Lissa's six points represented nine separate battles, with her opponents, the positions before her and, at times, her own doubts.

That last contest may have been the most important.

Experience had not removed uncertainty from her chess. It had taught her how to continue in its presence. She no longer needed to feel completely confident before competing seriously. She needed to trust the preparation she had completed, calculate the position in front of her and resist allowing fear to make decisions on her behalf.

Her return also confirmed that the first qualification had not been an isolated breakthrough. She had gone from a self-taught online beginner to a first-time Olympian, then returned to national competition and earned another opportunity to carry Tanzania's flag.

Yet Lissa does not speak as though qualification were the destination. Selection merely changes the question. The concern is no longer whether she will travel to Samarkand, but what kind of player will arrive there.

The answer is being constructed through preparation: analysing her Budapest games, studying tactical positions, improving her middlegame calculation and strengthening the mind responsible for every move.

Six points opened the door.

What Lissa does before walking through it may define her second Olympiad.

Next: Chapter Six — Training the Unseen Player

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Long before Lissa Siya Joseph makes her first move in Samarkand, another contest will already be underway.

It will not appear on the chessboard. Spectators following the game online will not see it, and the official results will never record it. Yet it may influence every calculation, decision and reaction that follows.

It is the contest inside the player's mind.

Preparing for the Chess Olympiad requires Lissa to study openings, solve tactical puzzles, practise endgames and analyse previous performances. She begins by returning to her own games, particularly those from national competitions and the 2024 Olympiad in Budapest. Instead of searching only for moves that make her feel proud, she looks for recurring weaknesses, moments when her calculation failed, her visualisation became unclear or her confidence affected the quality of her decisions.

“I analyse my past games, my Olympiad games and my national games,” she explains. “I start with my weaknesses.”

Her opening preparation does not concern her as much as what happens after the familiar moves have ended. Openings can be studied, repeated and memorised. They give players an initial structure and a sense of direction. The middlegame is different. Once the position leaves established theory, the player must begin solving problems independently.

That is where Lissa believes her preparation must become sharper.

“I am not worried about my openings,” she says. “It is the middlegame, calculation and visualisation, that needs more attention.”

Calculation requires her to examine possible moves and responses without touching the pieces. Visualisation asks her to hold those imagined positions clearly in her mind, sometimes several moves ahead. A single variation may branch into multiple possibilities, each carrying its own risks. If one detail is overlooked, a vulnerable king, an undefended piece or a quiet tactical threat, the entire conclusion can collapse.

At the Olympiad, this work must be performed under pressure. The clock continues running. The opponent remains across the table. There may be no familiar coach nearby to confirm whether an idea is sound. Lissa must trust her preparation and make the decision herself.

But technical training addresses only part of the challenge.

“Chess is not only about the body,” she says. “It is about the mind.”

A player may understand an opening and still enter the game feeling intimidated. She may calculate accurately for several hours, make one serious mistake and then lose control of the position because she cannot release the disappointment. Fatigue, anxiety and self-doubt can quietly undo preparation that took weeks to build.

Lissa knows the emotional pattern that follows a mistake.

“Why did I do this?” she asks herself. “How could I not see it?”

The questions are natural, but they can become dangerous. While she is mentally returning to the mistake, the game continues moving forward. The position that existed before the error is gone. If she remains trapped there, one inaccurate move can produce another, turning a recoverable disadvantage into a defeat.

Her task is therefore not to become emotionless. It is to shorten the distance between disappointment and recovery.

She tries to interrupt the reaction, regain her concentration and examine the position that remains. What is the opponent threatening now? What resources are still available? Can the position be simplified, defended or made uncomfortable enough to create new chances?

This ability to recover may matter as much as avoiding the original mistake. Chess is not always won by the player who plays perfectly. Sometimes it is won by the player who responds more intelligently after imperfection.

Lissa describes herself as a defensive, calculation-oriented player. She is willing to remain patient, absorb pressure and search for practical possibilities. Yet unfamiliar opponents can still awaken the doubtful voice within her. An unexpected opening or aggressive playing style may create the impression that the other player understands more than she does.

The danger begins when respect becomes intimidation.

In Samarkand, Lissa will face players from different chess cultures, some supported by stronger coaching structures and more frequent international competition. Their ratings and reputations may enter the playing hall before they do. If she allows those details to dominate her thoughts, she could begin defending against an opponent's name rather than responding to the actual position.

The board, however, presents the same sixty-four squares to both players.

That is why Lissa's preparation must strengthen more than her memory. She is training herself to remain present, to calculate what she can verify and to trust the work completed before the tournament. Confidence, in this sense, does not mean believing she cannot lose. It means refusing to surrender mentally before the position has decided anything.

Her most difficult opponent in Samarkand may not be the person sitting across from her.

It may be the voice that asks whether she truly belongs there.

Lissa's answer will not need to be spoken. It will appear in her patience after a difficult move, her recovery after a mistake and her willingness to continue searching when the position becomes uncomfortable.

She is preparing the openings the world may see.

She is also training the player no one can see.

Next: Chapter Seven — The Knight Becoming a Queen

Chapter Seven: The Knight Becoming a Queen

If Lissa Siya Joseph had to choose one chess piece to represent who she is today, she would choose the knight.

It is an appropriate choice for a journey that has rarely followed a straight line.

Unlike the rook, bishop or queen, the knight moves in a pattern entirely its own. It can leap over surrounding pieces, escape crowded positions and reach squares that appear inaccessible to everyone else. Its movement can initially confuse beginners and unsettle opponents who fail to recognise the possibilities hidden inside its unusual path.

“The knight is creative and unpredictable to some point,” Lissa explains.

The description also reflects something about her. Lissa did not enter chess through the route many people might expect of an Olympian. She was not introduced to the game in childhood by a coach, trained through a school programme or guided into competition by an established chess institution. She discovered chess online while searching for a healthier alternative to social media, taught herself the fundamentals and gradually found her way into Tanzania’s competitive community.

Like the knight, she arrived by an unconventional route.

Her progress has also depended on creativity. Without a carefully prepared pathway, she had to build one for herself, moving from digital games to a physical board, from private learning to national competition and from the uncertainty of her first tournament to representing Tanzania at the 2024 Chess Olympiad in Budapest.

The journey was not obvious from the square where it began.

Lissa also appreciates the bishop, another piece whose influence can be underestimated. A bishop may appear quiet while the centre remains closed, but once a diagonal opens, its power can stretch from one side of the board to the other.

She describes it as a sniper.

The bishop does not always announce its intentions. It waits, watches and applies pressure from a distance. That patience reflects part of Lissa’s playing character. She considers herself a defensive, calculation-oriented player, someone willing to examine a position carefully, absorb pressure and wait for the right moment rather than forcing action simply because the board has become uncomfortable.

Yet neither the knight nor the bishop represents the person she hopes to become.

For that, Lissa chooses the queen.

“The queen is more confident,” she says. “She is not scared, and she is capable of making a bigger impact.”

On a chessboard, the queen combines extraordinary freedom with extraordinary responsibility. She can move across ranks, files and diagonals, transforming from

defender to attacker within a single move. Her presence can control the entire character of a position, but her power must be handled carefully. A queen brought into action without preparation can become exposed; one used with purpose can influence almost every square that matters.

For Lissa, becoming the queen is therefore not about appearing powerful. It is about developing the confidence to use the ability she already possesses.

That remains one of the unseen struggles within her chess journey. Lissa has twice earned selection to represent Tanzania at the Olympiad, yet achievement does not automatically silence self-doubt. An unfamiliar opening, highly rated opponent or difficult position can still awaken the internal question of whether she truly belongs at that level.

The evidence says that she does.

She taught herself the game, finished among Tanzania's leading women in her first serious competition, represented the country in Budapest and returned to national competition to secure another Olympiad place with six points across nine rounds. Those achievements were earned across the board, where reputation cannot make a correct move on a player's behalf.

Confidence, however, does not always respond immediately to evidence. It must be practised much like calculation or visualisation. Lissa must learn to enter important rooms without mentally reducing herself before the competition begins. She must respect strong opponents without surrendering authority to their ratings and recognise that preparation gives her the right to trust her own decisions.

Becoming the queen also means expanding her impact beyond personal results.

At university, Lissa established a chess club and began teaching others. Every student she introduces to the game extends the meaning of her own journey. Every girl who sees a Tanzanian woman teaching chess, competing nationally and carrying the flag internationally encounters a different answer to the question once asked during Lissa's early online days: *Are there even girls playing chess in Tanzania?*

Yes, there are.

They are learning, teaching, competing and qualifying for Olympiads.

Lissa wants that presence to become more visible. Her development is not only about gaining rating points or recording international victories. It is also about becoming someone whose confidence creates space for others, particularly girls who may be curious about chess but have not yet seen a clear pathway into the game.

The transformation she describes is still in progress. She does not claim to have eliminated fear or mastered every part of herself. The knight remains important because creativity, independence and unconventional thinking brought her this far.

Becoming the queen does not require abandoning those qualities. It means adding confidence, reach and greater purpose to them.

Samarkand will offer another stage on which that growth can be tested. Across the board, Lissa will still need the knight's imagination and the bishop's patience. But she will also need the queen's willingness to occupy important squares, influence the position and act without apologising for her presence.

Today, Lissa sees herself as the creative knight.

The player she is becoming moves with greater confidence.

Next: Chapter Eight — The Women Who Keep Fighting

Chapter Eight: The Women Who Keep Fighting

Ratings can measure a player's performance, tournament standings can record her results and team lists can confirm her selection. Yet none of these numbers fully explains the quality Lissa Siya Joseph believes defines Tanzania's Women's Chess Team.

That quality is resilience.

"We fight for every game," she says. "We take every game seriously, and we support one another."

The statement captures both the competitive character of the team and the wider conditions through which its players have emerged. Tanzania's women are not only preparing to face opponents across the board. Many have also had to overcome limited access to structured coaching, regular tournaments, strong practice partners, sponsorship and international exposure.

Before a woman competes against another country, she may first have to defeat the idea that chess was never intended for her.

Lissa encountered that assumption early in her journey. When she met a fellow Tanzanian during an online game, he was surprised to discover that his opponent was a woman.

"Are there even girls playing chess in Tanzania?" he asked.

The question became a bridge into the country's chess community, but it also revealed a deeper problem. Female players existed, yet they were still not visible enough for their presence to appear ordinary. A girl could be interested in chess and still struggle

to identify a woman competing at national level, a nearby coach willing to guide her or a clear pathway connecting curiosity to serious competition.

Lissa wants the next girl's arrival to be less surprising.

"Chess is not a gender-based sport," she says. "It is a mental sport."

The board does not assign different movements to pieces according to the player's gender. The clock offers no additional time to men, and a tactical idea does not become less accurate because a woman calculated it. Chess tests preparation, concentration, creativity, discipline and the ability to make decisions under pressure.

Social expectations, however, can shape who receives the opportunity to develop those abilities.

A boy who shows curiosity may be encouraged to compete. A girl displaying the same interest may be treated as though chess were simply a temporary hobby. Without sustained encouragement, access to coaching or visible examples of women succeeding, early enthusiasm can disappear before talent has the opportunity to reveal itself.

The scale of the challenge can be seen in Tanzania's player statistics. In the March 2026 FIDE rankings, only four Tanzanian women were listed as active rated players: Prisha Chheda, Mahi Shah, Lissa Siya Joseph and Anahi Rishit Shah. Lissa's rating stood at 1499. Tanzania's overall world ranking had improved from 166th to 164th, while its total number of active rated players had risen from 21 to 27. The progress was encouraging, but the small number of active rated women showed how narrow the competitive pathway remained. The Guardian's report placed Lissa among Tanzania's leading active women players.

Those figures do not indicate an absence of potential. They reveal how much potential still needs to be reached.

Lissa believes girls should accept opportunities to train, enter tournaments and allow themselves to be seen. Her own story demonstrates what can happen when curiosity is supported rather than dismissed. She discovered chess independently, learned online, entered national competition as a beginner and reached the Olympiad. Her mother and twin sister helped her continue when she doubted herself, lending her belief before she could consistently produce it on her own.

But individual determination cannot carry the entire responsibility for developing women's chess.

Tanzania needs stronger systems: chess clubs in schools and universities, trained coaches, mentorship from experienced players, regular women's competitions, financial support and greater access to regional and international tournaments. Girls must be introduced to the game early, but they must also find meaningful opportunities to continue once their interest becomes serious.

Visibility tells a girl that participation is possible.

Structure gives her somewhere to go after she believes it.

Within the national team, support between players becomes especially important. Although they compete individually across separate boards, their results contribute to a shared national performance. A difficult defeat affects one player emotionally, but it can also influence the atmosphere surrounding the entire squad. Encouragement, therefore, is not merely a gesture of friendship. It is part of the team's competitive strength.

Resilience means returning to the board after disappointment. It means continuing to calculate when the position becomes uncomfortable, refusing to treat a stronger opponent's rating as a prediction and remembering that the team's responsibility extends beyond a single game.

In Samarkand, Tanzania's women will face teams supported by deeper chess cultures and stronger preparation systems. Some opponents will arrive with professional coaches, extensive databases and years of international competition behind them. Lissa and her teammates cannot change those advantages once the clocks begin.

They can decide how they respond to them.

They will fight for each position, support one another and carry the ambitions of girls who may be watching an Olympiad for the first time. Their presence will answer the question Lissa once heard online more powerfully than any explanation could.

Yes, Tanzanian women play chess.

And when they reach the board, they keep fighting.

Next: Chapter Nine — What an Olympian Needs

Chapter Nine: What an Olympian Needs

The public usually encounters an athlete at the moment of selection.

A name appears on the national team list. A photograph is shared. Congratulations arrive, expectations rise and attention begins shifting towards the competition ahead. The selection is celebrated as though reaching the team were the final achievement.

For Lissa Siya Joseph, however, qualification is only the beginning of another demanding journey.

Earning a place on Tanzania's Women's Chess Team confirms that a player has performed strongly enough at national level. It does not automatically provide everything she needs to compete effectively against the world. Between qualification and the first move in Samarkand lies a preparation gap that determination alone cannot always close.

Lissa identifies professional coaching as the most urgent need.

A strong coach does more than teach openings or point out mistakes after a game. The coach studies a player's patterns, identifies weaknesses she may not recognise herself and creates a structured programme for improvement. For Lissa, whose focus includes middlegame calculation and visualisation, professional guidance could help transform general effort into targeted progress.

Without that structure, preparation can become fragmented. A player may solve tactical puzzles, study openings and analyse games, yet still struggle to determine which weakness deserves the most attention or how different parts of training should fit together.

At Olympiad level, those details matter.

"An Olympian needs a coach," Lissa says. "We need proper preparation before going to the bigger tournament."

Coaching is only one part of the system she believes Tanzanian players require. Organised training camps would allow the national team to prepare together, study likely opponents, practise under tournament conditions and strengthen communication among players and officials. Strong practice partners could expose them to different styles, while regular evaluation games would reveal whether their preparation was producing measurable improvement.

The team also needs opportunities to compete internationally before arriving in Samarkand.

"There are many tournaments an Olympian should go through before getting to the bigger tournament," Lissa explains. "We need that exposure and experience."

Regional competitions in countries such as Kenya and South Africa could serve as essential preparation grounds. They would introduce Tanzanian players to unfamiliar opponents, different competitive environments and the emotional demands of playing away from home. Each tournament would offer lessons that cannot be fully reproduced through online games or private study.

A player can learn an opening from a database.

She learns how she responds to international pressure by experiencing it.

Lissa discovered this difference in Budapest. The 2024 Olympiad exposed her to players shaped by stronger chess systems, frequent tournaments and years of structured preparation. Some opponents entered the playing hall with professional coaching support, extensive opening knowledge and confidence built through repeated international competition.

Talent allowed Lissa to reach that stage. Experience showed her what was still missing.

Financial support therefore becomes inseparable from competitive preparation. Training camps require venues and equipment. Professional coaching carries a cost. Regional tournaments involve transport, accommodation, registration fees and meals. International preparation can become impossible when players are expected to carry those expenses personally while also managing education, work and family responsibilities.

For Lissa, sponsorship would not represent luxury. It would create access to the conditions required for serious preparation.

The distinction matters. Olympians are often praised for representing the country, yet the practical responsibility of becoming internationally competitive can remain largely theirs. Players may be expected to produce national pride from systems that have not consistently provided the coaching, competition and financial support necessary to build it.

Lissa is not asking for comfort.

She is asking for the tools required to compete.

The need extends beyond one tournament. If investment begins only after players qualify for the Olympiad, Tanzania will continue preparing for major competitions too late. A stronger national chess system would identify promising players earlier, provide year-round coaching, organise regular classical tournaments and build consistent pathways from school clubs to national representation.

That system would also help widen the women's game. The limited number of active rated Tanzanian women reflects not a shortage of intelligence or ambition, but a shortage of sustained opportunities. Coaching, mentorship and competition would give emerging players the chance to develop before the pressure of national selection arrives.

Lissa's journey shows what individual determination can achieve. She taught herself chess online, entered competitive play as a beginner, represented Tanzania in Budapest and earned a second Olympiad appearance through six points at the 2026 National Championship.

But her story should not be used to argue that strong systems are unnecessary.

It should show what becomes possible when a determined player receives greater support.

When Lissa sits across from an opponent in Samarkand, the game will appear individual. She alone will calculate the variations, manage the clock and make the final decision. Yet behind that performance should stand something larger: coaches, training partners, administrators, sponsors and a national structure that prepared her to compete.

Selection gives an Olympian the flag.

Preparation gives her the best chance to defend it.

Next: Chapter Ten — Playing Good Chess

Chapter Ten: Playing Good Chess

Lissa Siya Joseph is not travelling to Samarkand with a promise to win every game.

She understands chess too well for that.

At the Olympiad, she will encounter experienced opponents from different countries, each carrying her own preparation, ambitions and reasons for wanting to succeed. Some will arrive with higher ratings, professional coaching and years of international competition. Others may be participating for the first time, bringing the same mixture of pride and uncertainty that Lissa carried into Budapest in 2024.

The outcome of any individual game cannot be guaranteed.

What Lissa can control is the quality of chess she brings to the board.

“I want to play good chess, gain experience and make Tanzania proud,” she says.

The statement may sound modest beside the language usually associated with international sport. Athletes are often expected to predict medals, promise victories or speak as though confidence requires certainty. Lissa’s ambition is more measured, but it is not less demanding. Playing good chess means turning months of preparation into clear decisions while the clock is running and the pressure is real.

It means remembering the lessons Budapest gave her.

In her first Olympiad, Lissa discovered how quickly a small inaccuracy could grow into a serious problem. She experienced unfamiliar openings, stronger competition and the psychological weight of facing players shaped by established chess systems. Those games showed her that international performance depends not only on what a player knows, but also on whether she can access that knowledge when the position becomes difficult.

Samarkand is an opportunity to respond differently.

Lissa wants to calculate more accurately through the middlegame, visualise positions more clearly and recover more quickly when a move does not work as intended. She wants to respect her opponents without allowing their ratings to decide the game before it begins. Above all, she wants her moves to reflect the player she has been working to become since returning from Budapest.

For her, a good game is not defined only by the final result. A victory produced through careless play may still expose serious weaknesses, while a defeat against a strong opponent can contain evidence of improvement. The result matters, especially in a team competition, but so does the quality of the decisions that produced it.

This is why Lissa analyses her games immediately after playing.

A win does not allow her to ignore what went wrong. Instead of celebrating for long, she begins investigating the position. Where did the advantage emerge? Which move could have been stronger? Did she calculate accurately, or did the opponent simply fail to punish a mistake?

Her instinct is to turn every completed game into another lesson.

That habit will be essential during the Olympiad, where rounds follow one another and there is little time to remain emotionally attached to the previous result. A painful defeat must be studied without being carried into the next game. A satisfying victory must build confidence without producing carelessness. Each morning brings a new opponent, a new position and another responsibility to the team.

Lissa will travel with one small object that reflects this approach: her chess notebook.

Inside it are ideas, observations and lessons gathered through training and competition. In an era of digital databases and online analysis, the notebook offers something more personal. It records not only moves, but the evolution of a player learning how she thinks.

Samarkand will add new pages.

The Olympiad will also test Lissa's preferred style. She describes herself as defensive and calculation-oriented, a player willing to remain patient and search for resources in uncomfortable positions. Yet playing good chess may sometimes require her to step beyond that familiar identity, to recognise when a position demands aggression, when caution has become hesitation and when an opportunity must be seized before it disappears.

That is where the creative knight and the confident queen meet.

The knight represents the unconventional path that brought her into chess: online discovery, self-teaching and progress through routes no one had prepared for her. The queen represents the confidence and influence she is still developing. In Samarkand, she will need both, the imagination to find unexpected possibilities and the courage to trust them.

Making Tanzania proud will not rest on one spectacular move. It will be expressed through discipline: arriving prepared, fighting for every position, supporting her teammates and carrying herself with dignity regardless of the result. It will mean recognising that the flag beside her name represents more than personal ambition.

Girls discovering chess in Tanzania may follow her games. University students she has introduced to the sport may see their teacher competing on the world stage. Her mother and twin sister, the people who believed in her during her uncertain first tournament, will once again watch the journey continue.

Lissa cannot control what every game will give her.

She can control whether she arrives ready to learn, ready to fight and ready to make decisions worthy of the opportunity she earned.

Her goal is simple to say and difficult to achieve.

Play good chess. Gain experience. Make Tanzania proud.

Next: Chapter Eleven — The Flag Beside Her Name

Chapter Eleven: The Flag Beside Her Name

When Lissa Siya Joseph sits down at the Chess Olympiad in Samarkand, her name will not appear alone.

Beside it will be the Tanzanian flag.

To spectators following the tournament, it may look like a small digital symbol, a familiar combination of green, gold, black and blue displayed beside a player's name, federation and rating. For Lissa, it carries the weight of an entire journey: the online chessboard where she taught herself to play, the embarrassing first encounter with physical pieces, the national tournament she entered as a beginner and the family members who continued believing when her confidence weakened.

The flag represents where she comes from, but it also reminds her why she is there.

"Representing Tanzania means a lot to me," she says. "I want to make my country proud."

In Samarkand, every move will belong to Lissa, but its meaning will extend beyond her. She will be one of the women carrying Tanzania into a competition that brings together different languages, cultures, playing styles and chess traditions. Across the board may sit an opponent supported by years of professional coaching and regular international exposure. Around them will be teams from countries where chess is deeply embedded in schools, clubs and national sporting systems.

For a few hours, however, those larger differences will be compressed onto sixty-four squares.

There, Lissa will not be the student balancing laboratory medicine with chess preparation, the beginner who once struggled to recognise pieces on a physical board or the player who questioned whether she belonged in international competition. She will be Tanzania's representative, responsible for the position before her and the decisions required by it.

That responsibility brings pressure, but it also offers freedom. Once the game begins, speculation disappears. Ratings cannot move pieces. Reputation cannot calculate variations. The quality of the position must be tested through the choices each player makes.

Lissa has earned the right to make hers.

Her journey to a second Olympiad matters because it was never carefully designed for her. No one placed a chessboard in her hands during childhood and announced that she might one day represent Tanzania. She discovered the game while searching for a productive way to sharpen her mind. Curiosity led to online matches; those matches led to Tanzania's chess community; a first tournament led to Budapest; and the lessons of Budapest helped guide her back into national competition.

Six points across nine rounds secured her ticket to Samarkand.

Yet the deeper achievement is not simply that Lissa qualified twice. It is that she continued growing after the surprise of her first qualification. Budapest could have remained an extraordinary event, a remarkable chapter in the life of a self-taught beginner. Instead, she treated it as an education. She returned to her games, identified weaknesses and began preparing for another opportunity.

Her second Olympiad is therefore not a repetition of the first.

It is evidence of development.

The Lissa travelling to Samarkand understands international competition more clearly. She knows the danger of intimidation, the importance of middlegame calculation and the emotional discipline required after a mistake. She knows that a player cannot remain trapped inside a lost opportunity while the current position continues demanding attention.

She also knows that preparation is not carried by the player alone. Her mother and twin sister encouraged her through the uncertainty of her first national competition. Teammates created a community in a sport that initially seemed solitary. Other Tanzanian players helped her move from online chess into organised competition. Every person who offered guidance, belief or opportunity became part of the road leading towards Samarkand.

The flag beside her name belongs to them too.

It also belongs to the girls who have not yet discovered chess. Some may encounter it through a school club. Others may find the game online, just as Lissa did. They may begin without coaching, equipment or visible examples of Tanzanian women competing internationally. Their first moves may be uncertain, and their earliest defeats may feel like evidence that they are not talented enough.

Lissa's story offers another interpretation.

A difficult beginning does not define the distance a person can travel.

Her journey does not pretend that determination solves every structural challenge. Tanzanian chess still needs stronger coaching, more regular tournaments, greater international exposure and sustained support for women and young players. Talent cannot develop indefinitely on encouragement alone. If the country wants more Olympians, and stronger performances when they arrive, it must invest in the pathway between curiosity and excellence.

But Lissa demonstrates what may already be waiting inside that pathway.

She is a laboratory medicine student who became an Olympian. A self-taught player who established a university chess club. A creative knight learning to carry herself with the confidence of a queen. Her story contains no perfect progression, only curiosity strengthened by persistence and opportunities met with courage.

That may be her most important lesson to others.

You do not need to see the entire route before making the first move.

In Samarkand, Lissa hopes to play good chess, gain experience and make Tanzania proud. Some games will reward her preparation. Others may reveal weaknesses that still require attention. There will be victories to study honestly, defeats to recover from and positions that test whether the unseen player inside her has become stronger.

Whatever the results, she will return with new knowledge.

That is how her journey has always advanced: one discovery creating the next question, one competition revealing the next level and one difficult position teaching her to look again.

Before chess, Lissa was searching for something that could sharpen her mind.

She found a game that changed her life.

Now, when she sits at the Olympiad board and looks across at her opponent, the pieces will no longer feel unfamiliar. She will understand the setting, the pressure and the responsibility. She will know that she belongs, not because the journey was easy, but because she earned her place through every uncertain step that brought her there.

Then the clock will begin.

Lissa will make her move.

And beside her name, Tanzania will move with her.

End of Series