

## **Greatest 28**

### Chapter 28 - Life At The Academy II

Zachary let himself step off the treadmill when the sweat settled on his skin as newly melted snow crystals. His legs were empty—and there was a rising feeling of nausea from his stomach.

It never ceased to amaze him how the muscles that had been working so hard only seconds ago were then struggling to hold his weight. He relaxed for a few seconds before jumping on the exercising machine once again to restart the high-intensity routine.

Zachary only had that single exercise remaining to complete the system mission he had been toiling with for over a year.

He was glad about the training plans designed by the system. The high-intensity interval-training mimicked the rhythms of a real football match—where a player might quickly switch between walking around the pitch and sprinting into the box.

He had been undergoing the routine for more than six months to condition his body to adapt to an efficient way of using oxygen and prepare for the sudden change of pace in games.

The system had been gradually increasing the frequency or number of repetitions in his running routines on the treadmill.

For instance, the system had assigned him the weekly task of 30-second high-speed sprints repetitions on the treadmill, spaced with 1-minute resting intervals during the first three months of the mission. The next months, the missions comprised shorter and shorter resting intervals to increase the exercising intensity.

Zachary continuously increased the stress on his musculoskeletal system to gain muscle size, strength, and endurance. And his efforts had paid off over the year of training. He was stronger physically compared to the previous year.

Zachary was sure that he could hold his own in a physical battle against the strongest Rosenborg under-19s. He was itching for an official match to test his skills.

Zachary had been in a good mood when his body was getting stronger as the months progressed. On a treadmill, he always felt fast up there, exhilarated. To feel his strength, to feel his own body flying at such speeds before slowing down, it fed back right into the soul and kept his inner flames healthy and bright.

"DING"

The system notification sounded when he was on his eighteenth routine of the high-intensity exercise. That was music to Zachary's ears as it indicated that he had finished the final task of the one-year progressive overload fitness training mission.

Before he knew it, Zachary was smiling a little, a smile with a twist to it, like the smile of a child who was determined not to weep. He was feeling the agony of the intensive exercise coupled with the happiness from completing the system mission. The two combined to bring him a sadistic euphoria.

However, he didn't pause to open the system interface. He continued running on the treadmill—until he completed the twenty routines of the high-intensity training for the day.

"Okay, boys. First, come here," Coach Johansen hollered from the stretching and mobility area of the gym. He was in his usual unique style outfit—in a baggy black Nike tracksuit.

"This is rare," Paul commented. "The coach is giving a talk early in the morning. There may be something important coming up."

"Like a match? Or more like the cutting of certain players!" Kasongo frowned.

"Stop speculating," Kendrick cut in. "Let's head over and see what he has to say." He turned towards Zachary—who had just stepped off the treadmill before asking: "Are you coming?"

"Of course." Zachary smiled. He reached out and took out a bottle of water from his backpack before chugging down some water. "Oh, that was refreshing." He sighed in between gasps of breath.

The three-hour exercising had already tired him out. But Zachary wasn't worried. He would recover his stamina in a few hours due to the dosage of the physical conditioning elixir he had consumed earlier that week.

"Let's go and hear what the coach has to say this time," he said to his flat-mates after he'd steadied his breathing.

"Is everyone here?" Coach Johansen asked, his gaze roaming across the sixteen players seated in the middle of the gym.

"Sir," Coach Bjørn Peters said. "I've already taken roll call—and everyone is here." He was a man of middling height with a stern face and deep-set eyes. His regular gym work-outs made his chest, arms, and shoulders laden with muscle making him resemble a bodybuilder instead of a soccer coach.

"Great." Coach Johansen nodded. "I'm glad you're now taking your physical training seriously. Had anyone been absent without reason, they would have faced the ax today."

"I hope it's a good morning for everyone here!" The Coach continued. "Moving on. You lot will be undergoing annual reviews in the next two weeks. We want to assess your progress over the past twelve months. So, we have organized two matches where you can showcase the fruits of your training for the past year."

"Next Friday, you play against the Rosenberg under-19 team combined with the reserves team. The Friday after that, you'll face off against the senior team of Rosenberg. Aren't you excited?" The coach grinned, glancing around the gym.

"Playing against the Rosenberg senior team for our review! How are we supposed to perform against experienced players? The academy officials are not serious..." The murmuring of the players intensified the already tense atmosphere in the gym.

"Quiet," Coach Johansen bellowed, creasing a brow. "This is an opportunity for you. The Rosenberg officials will be watching. You have a chance to make it into the Reserve team or even be spotted by the head coach. What are you afraid of?"

"As long as you have improved, you don't need to fear playing against the reserve or the senior team of Rosenberg," the coach continued. "We don't expect you to win, but to perform at your best even when facing players above your level. That will be a valuable experience for your budding football career."

The players around the gym settled down after hearing his peroration. Although they seemed to be worried, they couldn't force the coach to change the annual review. They just had to swallow their anger and anxiety.

But Zachary was different. He wanted to test his skills against high-level players. Only then would Zachary gauge his progress and determine whether his skills were already good enough to join the professional league. Moreover, he was hungry for matches since he hadn't played a single official game in a year.

"Coach!" One of the players raised his arm after the coach had finished making his announcement.

"Yes. You can ask your question, Martin." Coach Johansen nodded at the player.

"How many of the under-17s need to be cut from the team after this review?" The lanky, gangling boy asked.

"You know I can't tell you that." Coach Johansen grinned. "But we need very few players from your team to join the under-19 group. However, if you all play a shitty game, then you'll all be cut from the team. So, do your best."

"Any more questions?"

All the players remained silent.

"Okay, great." The coach smiled. "Let's meet at the NF training grounds at 3:30 PM today. We'll start our pre-match training then—so don't be late."