

Greatest 31

Chapter 31 - An Upgraded System

As Zachary was about to begin perusing through the system user-interface, his phone's buzzer went off like an annoyed rattlesnake. He scooped it up, glanced at its screen, and noticed that his grandma was calling.

"Zachary!" His grandma's husky but comforting voice sounded from the phone when he placed it close to his ear. "Are you there?" She intoned in the Swahili language.

"Ndio, bibi," he spoke into the Motorola Moto-G phone. "Are you settling in well? How is the new place?" He asked in a humble tone, maintaining a clear Swahili accent.

Zachary had managed to move her from Bukavu after saving up half his allowance for a year. With 84,000 Norwegian Kroner, he rented her a sizeable house in Lubumbashi—and hired some casual laborers to work her farm back in Bukavu. Zachary had not been able to return to the Congo in the summer due to his tight training schedule. However, he had sent money to Coach Damata and tasked him with settling her in the new city. He'd even bought her a new phone, similar to his own, for easier communication.

"You know me," said his grandma. "I didn't want to move to the city. It's boring here. And my cows, my animals may be dying." She complained. The old lady loved her farm. It had taken endless pleading on Zachary's part in conjunction with Coach Damata's remarkable people-skills to convince her to move from Bukavu.

"But we agreed that you would set-up a crafts shop in Lubumbashi," Zachary said. "That should keep you busy. Moreover, don't you find Lubumbashi safer than the neighborhoods in our village?"

Zachary's grandma sighed audibly. "Enough about me," she drawled. Zachary could discern a suppressed melancholy undertone in her voice. It seemed she hadn't gotten used to living in the new city. "Are you studying and training hard? When will I get to see you on television?" She asked.

Zachary spent the next five minutes telling his grandma about his life in Norway. He talked about his classes, training, the weather, and a few other topics to assure his grandma that he was safe.

He was glad that he had a way to communicate with the sole parental figure he knew in both his lives. Zachary never got tired of hearing her voice because it kept all the homesickness he felt when he was in Norway at bay.

He had come to realize that going back in time had not turned him into a machine with only one goal; playing soccer. At times, some of the feelings he had occasionally suppressed in his previous life would threaten to drown his mind.

During the Christmas break of the previous year, he'd spent hours looking at the falling white snow through his window, thinking about his grandma, all alone back in Bukavu. The snow resting upon the earth in that winter, as if it were an endless feather cushion, had made him homesick, made him long for home. That was why he had felt compelled to purchase a phone to better communicate with her.

Zachary had not yet achieved the sort of steel nerves that could allow him to switch off everything else and focus solely on soccer. Maybe, that was why the system still graded his mental ability at B -.

However, Zachary didn't wish to lose all his emotions and become a soccer maniac. He wanted to experience all the things his new life had to offer whilst also becoming one of the best in the soccer world. That was his goal.

After talking to his grandma, Zachary returned his attention to the system. He re-opened the user-interface after placing his phone on the bedside table and began—skimming through the system menu.

SOCCER G.O.A.T SYSTEM

SYSTEM LEVEL: 2 (367/1000 Juju-points to level-up)

USER: Zachary Bemba

AGE: 16 years

TALENT ASSESSMENT: Grade-B

JUJU-POINTS: 367 (2 msg)

(Evaluation: A budding soccer player)

USER MENU

*USER STATS

*G.O.A.T MISSIONS (4 msg)

*SYSTEM SHOP

*SYSTEM LOTTERY (locked)

*SNOOPING TOOL

NB: Pls level-up the system to unlock more functions.

Zachary didn't take much time scanning the contents of the interface. He had upgraded the system a year ago and was already familiar with the level-2 interface. He extended his forefinger right away and tapped on the G.O.A.T-missions tab, already blinking red on the interface.

"DING"

#4 new messages

CONGRATULATIONS

-> You have completed the mission (One-Year Progressive Overload Fitness Training).

->Mission-Rewards

1) C-grade Physical Conditioning Elixir (Already availed to the user.)

2) 260 cumulative Jujū-Points.

->Mission Summary

*Training plan completed with perfection over one year.

Overall Mission Rating: A+

->Bonus rewards

You have earned 100 bonus juju-points

The mission rewards were what Zachary expected. He'd been earning a dosage of the physical conditioning elixir and 5 Juju-points for each of the weekly training plans designed by the system.

Over the 52 weeks in the previous year, he'd earned a total of 260 points. The system had awarded him a bonus of 100 Juju-points for his perfect completion of the mission. He then had enough to purchase one of the skills in the unlocked system shop.

However, he decided to check his user-stats first before opening the system shop.

*USER STATS

->Physical Fitness: A-

->Soccer Technique: A+

->Game Intelligence: A+

->Mental Ability and Mindset: B-

->X-Factors: F

->G.O.A.T Skills: 2

Zachary managed to improve his physical fitness and soccer technique by a single grade over the year of training. Due to his strict training schedule, involving yoga and meditation, his mental ability had finally improved from the C- grading to the B- grading. However, he had not managed to increase his X-factor even by a single grade over the course of the entire year. That single stat was holding back his talent assessment, yet he had no way to improve it.

[Maybe, I should seek help from one of the coaches.] Zachary sighed. He clicked on the physical-fitness tab.

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

Balance and Coordination: A+

Agility: A+

Strength: B+

Stamina: A-

Endurance Points: 4500/5500 (A-)

Zachary's physical fitness had benefited the most from the 1-year progressive overload training. His balance and coordination, together with his agility stats, had all leaped to the A+ grade. Only his strength stat remained shy of an A-grading among his physical stats. With his progress rate, he only had to continue with the intensive training plan—and one day, he would achieve the perfect physique for soccer.

Over the year of training, he had noticed that his physique was becoming less buff but more slender as he toned his muscles with vigorous exercise. He had achieved a body with lean, well-defined muscles with almost no body fat. He was a bit thinner than he originally was but in better shape as a soccer player.

He felt a sense of accomplishment since his physique had attained a mixture of the mesomorph and ectomorph body types. He was more agile with better body coordination—giving him an edge when dribbling or handling the ball. His soccer-technique grades for dribbling skills, passing accuracy, and body control had also improved due to his refined physique.

Zachary navigated back to the home menu of the system user-interface before opening the system-shop.

*SYSTEM SHOP

->Gift Packs (locked)

->Purchase Skills

->Purchase Elixirs

->Lottery Coupons (locked)

->Inventory

Zachary did not dawdle. He selected the purchase-skills tab on the system-shop menu right away. It was one of the features that had been unlocked by the system after its upgrade.

He blinked as his eyes adjusted to the new contents of the screen. Only two skills were available in the system shop. They appeared on skill cards hovering in front of everything else on the interface. One card depicted David Beckham, the famous English footballer, in a shooting posture with the ball. The other portrayed Andrea Pirlo, an Italian legend, with the ball at his feet.

Below the two skill-cards were a few words in beautiful calligraphy.

1) Bend-it like Beckham Juju: For setpieces. Costs 300 Juju-points.

2) Snipe-it like Pirlo Juju: For passing. Costs 300 Juju-points.

NB:

*The skills are limited to a single purchase until the next system upgrade.

*Please make your choice by tapping on the skill-card to purchase.

Zachary didn't need to deliberate much. He selected the 'Bend-it like Beckham Juju' right away.

He was already confident in his passes and only wanted to acquire skills capable of winning him games when he debuted for Rosenborg. The setpiece skill seemed like the best choice to Zachary at that moment since only a single purchase was allowed until the next upgrade of the system.

In his past life, Celtic had depended on Nakamura's freekicks to win several games—and contend for various Scottish titles. Zachary was sure he could become a great asset to any team if he mastered the art of taking setpieces at the level of Beckham. As a midfielder, he would not need to worry about being left out of the team roster as long as he could score most of his setpieces.

However, when Zachary tapped on the card with Beckham's image, a system notification instantly popped up.

*G.O.A.T Skills

#2 new messages

->You are attempting to learn a G.O.A.T Skill that requires both mental and physical conditioning before achieving initial mastery.

-> Activate the G.O.A.T Skills Simulator to commence mental conditioning by spending 2 Juju-points for 1-hour activation.

*Accept *Reject

"So this is the use of the simulator," Zachary mumbled to himself. He was enlightened. The G.O.A.T Skills Simulator was a new feature added under the G.O.A.T-Skills menu after the system upgrade. He had been ignorant of its use until that moment.

Without any hesitation, he clicked on the accept button to activate the simulator. He could not wait to learn new Juju.

Chapter 32 - The G.O.A.T Skills Simulator

"DING"

A new system notification popped up once Zachary selected the accept button.

*G.O.A.T Skills Simulator

#2 new messages

-> You have spent 2 Juju-points to activate the simulator for one hour.

->The system's virtual reality simulation will activate in two minutes. Please lie down and ready yourself for the procedure.

Zachary first locked the door of his bedroom, then closed the curtains before lying on his bed in a supine position. He calmed his mind and patiently waited for the two minutes to elapse.

When the countdown was over, new words started populating the user interface positioned at an oblique angle just before his face.

G.O.A.T Skills Simulator activating

Connecting System Neural Interface

ACTIVATION SUCCESSFUL

Zachary's eyesight blurred as soon as the last message of the system appeared on the screen. Everything became fuzzy; then he saw nothing at all. His consciousness drifted through a space filled with a thick static. His heart pounded loudly, echoing in his ears, as he descended into a new reality. The feeling in his body drained away until finally, all was black.

When Zachary's eyes recovered, he was no longer in his room or lying on his bed. Instead, he was in a dark space with only the glowing blueish system interface in his sight.

"DING"

The system notification sounded as new words populated the interface. Zachary blinked as his eyes adjusted to the lighting of the screen.

*G.O.A.T Skills Simulator

Mental Conditioning commencing...

Bend-it like Beckham Juju training packages loading...

Select the type of field surface to begin training the skill

a) Artificial turf

b) Natural turf

c) GrassMaster

Zachary naturally selected the GrassMaster turf since it was the most common field surface type in Trondheim. It was a hybrid field surface achieved by combining natural grass with synthetic reinforcing fibers. Although he was in a simulation, Zachary wanted to train on a familiar pitch to master the Bend-it like Beckham Juju quickly.

As soon as his right finger left the system interface, a perfect green soccer pitch started forming beneath his feet. It spread out and covered more ground in the formerly dark virtual space.

In a matter of seconds, Zachary stood in a world of green with millions of perfect grass strands beneath his soccer boots. His clothing had even changed into his preferred style, a kit with a green jersey and matching boots. He stood in between the goalposts similar to two white towers planted at either side of the demarcated pitch.

The system simulator didn't allow him any ounce of time to orient himself to his surroundings. No sooner had the ground finished forming than Zachary felt the ground below his boots move, giving him a feeling of being on a travelator. He swiftly crossed the pitch and arrived before the 18-yard box of the empty field.

In an explosion of luminescence, a vivid 3D image of David Beckham, in a red and white Manchester United Vodafone jersey, manifested beside Zachary. Five balls lined up before Beckham soon after.

The English soccer legend waved his arm dismissively towards the goal as glowing silhouettes materialized in the box before him. They included a wall of faceless players lined up about 10 yards away from the ball. After they had taken their positions, a goalkeeper appeared between the posts.

Zachary could tell that the system was simulating a real match scenario of taking a freekick. But he was confused about how the simulation would aid him in the mental training necessary to master the Beckham skill. Many players watched videos of legends performing in matches. However, that didn't guarantee they would master those skills.

Nonetheless, he remained attentive, watching David Beckham readying himself to shoot. He was eager to learn the legendary setpiece technique.

The English legend just moved a few steps back, positioned himself with his left shoulder at the 90 degrees mark facing the goal before observing the wall and the goalkeeper's position. He then approached the ball at a controlled speed and unleashed a curling ball, around the players and the goalkeeper, into the goal. He repeated the same procedure until all the balls were safely in the back of the net.

Zachary sighed in amazement as he analyzed the Englishman's shooting posture. He realized that the spin on Beckham's freekicks was nothing short of marvelous. However, he was still unsure how watching the Englishman taking setpieces would help him master a G.O.A.T skill.

However, the system resolved his doubts soon after.

The 3D image of the Englishman swiftly moved towards Zachary and merged with his silhouette. At that moment, Zachary lost command of his body. He could feel his muscles and even perceive his surroundings, but he wasn't in control.

Zachary felt himself taking seven steps behind the five new balls that had once again materialized before the box. He analyzed the field situation, the wall, goalkeeper positioning, and distance of one of the balls from the goalposts.

After a slow but steady approach, Zachary felt himself plant his right foot before taking a one and a half meter final jump step towards the ball. He then placed his left foot right beside the ball, cocked his right leg back, and kicked the ball with the side of his big toe. He let loose a curling shot into the back of the net.

His body, still not in his command, continued shooting the rest of the four balls. Zachary only regained control of his body after he'd kicked the last ball.

He had experienced how Beckham felt, perceived the surroundings, and controlled his body whenever he scored from a freekick. Zachary could tell that the system was slowly instilling the reflexes, body motions, and the other relevant knowledge necessary to learn the Bend-it like Beckham Juju within him. With just the five balls he had curled into the net, he had already begun to grasp the skill.

He only had to carry on shooting freekicks within the G.O.A.T skills simulator to advance his mastery of the skill. Thus, he continued practicing the setpieces for one hour until the system ejected him out of the simulation.

But he'd already made considerable progress. In just an hour, he'd managed to take 30 freekicks with Beckham's 3D-model as a guide. He could feel his knowledge about setpieces growing slowly but steadily. And all this had cost him a measly 2 Juju-points.

Zachary opened the system G.O.A.T skills menu to check out the progress of his skills.

->G.O.A.T Skills: 3

(i) ZINEDINE VISUAL JUJU

(1st-level: Progress: 61.021%)

(ii) ZACHARY-ARROW-SHOT

(2nd-level: Progress: 1%)

(iii) BEND-IT LIKE BECKHAM JUJU

(1st-level: Progress: 0.03%)

->G.O.A.T Skills Simulator

*Activate *Deactivate

(Activation costs 2 Juju-points per hour)

Zachary's mood lifted when he noticed that his Beckham skill expertise had already improved by 0.03%. He knew firsthand how challenging it was to achieve the complete initial mastery of G.O.A.T skills. He had only made 61% progress towards mastering the 1st level of the Zinedine Visual Juju even after a year of training.

However, the simulator had helped him progress by 0.03% after shooting only 30 balls in one night. That was music to his ears.

[I wonder whether I can use the simulator to train other skills.] Zachary mused.

He activated the simulator at the cost of 2 Juju-points once again. Zachary wanted to test whether the simulator could help him train his other G.O.A.T skills. However, only the arrow shot and the Beckham freekick skills were available under the simulator menu.

[So, that's why I could master the Zinedine Visual Juju before gaining access to the simulator.]

Zachary could comprehend why he could begin mastering the Zinedine-Visual-Juju without utilizing the simulator. The system had only infused match experience and tactical knowledge to increase his game intelligence before using the skill. Due to his high spatial awareness stat, he had faced no obstacle in comprehending and mastering the technique.

However, the requirements for the arrow shot and the freekick skills were different. Zachary had to master the perfect body posturing and bodily motions to execute the techniques with perfection. Even a slight shift in his balance could send the ball veering away from its intended path. The only way for the system to infuse the skills into Zachary's muscle memory was through the G.O.A.T skills simulator.

Zachary activated the simulator two more times that night, continuing his mental conditioning for the Bend-it like Beckham Juju. He managed to shoot 90 balls on setpieces and advanced the skill's progress by 0.09%. He slept at 1 am, feeling accomplished.

**** *

The next day, Zachary maintained his routine of waking up early in the morning, heading to the gym at six o'clock, and attending school. When the last lecturer for the day moved out of his classroom, Zachary swiftly approached Kendrick and asked for help with his freekick practice.

He needed to practice his techniques in the real world to supplement his training within the G.O.A.T skills simulator. Only then would he achieve the perfect mental and physical condition to execute the skill flawlessly.

"You want to start practicing setpieces?" Kendrick regarded Zachary with a relaxed calculating expression. "Don't you want to prepare for the review next week?" He inquired.

Zachary nodded. "We can practice for 30 minutes today before the coaches arrive and also during the few breaks in between the training. Could you fit this in your schedule?"

"I'm a goalkeeper," The Swede said with a frown. "Your freekick practice will only benefit me if your shots are more on than off-target. How good are you at setpieces?"

"I'm new to this," Zachary intoned. "But I'm confident that I'll be able to master freekicks very quickly." He smiled at his flatmate.

"Okay, then," Kendrick said in a mild tone. "I'll agree to become your training partner for a week. We'll see how it goes from there."

Zachary flashed him a grateful smile. "Thank you. But we need to hurry to the pitch before the others hamper our plans." Zachary said, pointing towards Kasongo and Paul. Their two flatmates were locked in a conversation with a group of girls.

"Okay." Kendrick nodded. "Let's move."

Zachary and Kendrick stealthily exited their classroom and headed to the academy training grounds on their bikes. Fifteen minutes later, they were all dressed in their training kits and ready to commence their setpiece training.

"I will set up the wall first," Kendrick announced.

"I will help," Zachary replied. "I would like to start with freekicks that are just outside the box."

"That's okay," Kendrick said, pulling one of the soccer-mannequins into the 18-yard box. In a few minutes, the two boys set-up a wall of five mannequins inside-but-close to the edge of the box.

"I'm ready when you are," Kendrick said as he positioned himself in between the goalposts. "Let's see what you got."

Zachary smiled and placed the ball about ten yards behind the mannequins. He relaxed his mind and then curled the ball towards the goal the same way he'd done in the simulation the previous night.

However, the first ball was still off-target by a wide margin.

Kendrick lifted his eyebrows. "Are you trying to shoot like Beckham? Why not start with some simple freekicks to get used to shooting from that position?" He asked.

"I got this," Zachary replied, smiling. "Don't worry. I've already mastered the technique—to some extent."

Zachary had felt his body positioning, at the moment he had made contact with the ball, being off by a slight margin. His supporting foot needed to be steadily planted and face the direction he wanted the ball to follow. Zachary also realized he needed to swing his hand up and backward while aligning himself at an angle of about 45-degrees before making contact with the ball. He hadn't been perfect in executing those body motions while taking the first freekick.

Zachary moved back and blasted the ball with the inner side of his boot once again. For that attempt, he felt he had perfectly mimicked the shooting posture—ingrained by the system into his muscle memory. His body motions had matched what he had done in the virtual reality while possessed by Beckham. Zachary sent the ball spinning, on a curved path, towards the goal with the side of his big toe.

Kendrick didn't even manage to react when the ball flew past him into the top right corner.

"Goal!" Zachary celebrated as if he had scored in a real match. He was on cloud nine. He felt confident he would master the Bend-it like Beckham Juju as long as he carried on training setpieces.

Kendrick couldn't hide an expression of surprise. Then he rolled his eyes. "Are you really new at taking freekicks?"

"That was luck," Zachary replied honestly. "I need to shoot a lot more balls before I can become consistent."

The Swede smiled. "Then I'll also get serious," he said, cleaning his goalkeeping gloves on his black sweat pants. "Do your best—and let me show you Iker Casillas in action." He grinned at Zachary.

The two boys practiced for a whole hour before joining the rest of their teammates for routine practice. Surprisingly, Coach Johansen silently concurred with their freekick training. He didn't call them for the warming up routines at the start of the training session that day.

Zachary managed to score an average of two out of every ten freekicks during the session. He could feel his body adapting to the obtuse shooting posture required for the skill. He only needed to maintain a strict training routine to perfect the Beckham Juju.

Zachary dedicated three hours of his daily schedule to freekick practice for the next six days. He spent an hour practicing with Kendrick and two in the simulator each day.

He didn't relax his physical and tactical training routines despite having to make time for setpiece practice.

The week passed, almost in a blur, and it was soon time for the academy review. Zachary would have to undergo the annual medical test and play a match with both the senior and junior teams of Rosenborg for that year's test. He was excited by the prospect of finally facing off against professional players.

Chapter 33 - The Annual Review

"Listen up, young fellas," said Coach Johansen, his voice deathly quiet and filled with foreboding. "I'm sure that most of you are thinking this game is just another insignificant friendly. And, as long as you

perform well, you won't be released by the academy. You'll pass the review. Isn't that right?" He grinned, letting his gaze roam over the sixteen players seated in a semi-circle before him.

The academy players before him remained silent, waiting for their coach to continue.

Zachary and his teammates had just finished warming up. They were in the dressing room, attending a pre-match tactical briefing for the game against Rosenborg's second team. Their opponents were a combination of both under 19s and reserves of the Rosenborg team.

"Let me tell you this. You can't afford to lose this game," Coach Johansen continued. "I understand that those men are a few years your seniors. They may have much more experience than you guys. But you still have to win. I hate losing—and you should, too. Go out there and play like your life depends on it. Otherwise, I'll cut most of you out of the team during the review." He took a few steps closer to the players. "Are we on the same page?" He asked in a solemn tone.

"Yes, Coach," all the players, including Zachary, replied, more or less in unison.

Coach Johansen nodded at the players before unfolding a piece of paper. "The starting line-up for today is as follows:

Goal Keeper; Kendrick Otterson

Center-backs; Robin Jatta, Lars Togstad, Daniel Kvande

Left-back; Martin Lundal, Right-back; Øyvind Alseth

Midfield; Magnus Blakstad, Zachary Bemba

Right-wing; Paul Kasongo, Left-wing; Kim Riksvold

Forward; Ørjan Børmark."

Zachary turned to look at Paul, his Swedish flatmate, after hearing the names on the squad. Coach Johansen had left him out of the starting line-up.

The boy's brows were—creased into a frown. He appeared devastated by the coach's decision. Zachary made a mental note to console him later and returned his attention to the coach's instructions.

"I want to emphasize one point once more. You're playing against a stronger team. That's for sure. That's why we are using the 5-4-1 formation. All of you, except ?rjan, have to defend and mark all their forwards and attacking midfielders. Center-backs! You have to maintain a high level of concentration for the whole match. You can't let them make runs behind you."

The coach turned towards Zachary and regarded him for a moment. "Zach boy," he said in a mild tone. "I need swift transitions, from the defense to striking, when you guys win the ball. You're in the midfield—and with your speed, you should be able to provide the wingers and forwards with through passes for counters. Right?"

"Yes, coach," Zachary replied. He fully grasped the strategy since Coach Johansen had been talking about it in training the entire week. The coach intended to have them play a purely defensive game and catch the opponents on the counterattack.

"Kasongo and Kim," Coach Johansen intoned, turning away from Zachary. "You'll be doing a lot of running during this game. The two of you have to support ?rjan in the attack, and also fall back quickly whenever we lose possession."

"Especially you, Kim," the coach emphasized, pointing at one of the players. "Please make sure you support Martin on the left-wing whenever we are defending against their attacks. Is that clear?"

"Yes, coach," Kim Riksvold, the starting left-winger, replied solemnly.

"Great. Let's have a good match." Coach Johansen smiled. "Bj?rn, give out the jerseys," he instructed, turning towards his assistant at his side.

Zachary and his teammates exited the dressing room once they had all donned their dark blue jerseys. On the way out of the dressing room, Zachary approached Paul Otterson and asked: "Are you alright?"

"Why wouldn't I be?" The Swede flashed him a smile. "I'm sure I'll get a chance to play later on in the game." He said.

Zachary clapped Paul's shoulder as they walked through the tunnel. "That's great. I thought you were depressed about the game. Stay positive. You'll get a chance to play." He consoled his friend.

Paul's smile faded, and he lowered his voice, his expression solemn. "I suggest you take this game more seriously."

"Of course, I will," Zachary replied, also in a whisper. "I always take every game seriously."

"You don't understand." Paul scowled at Zachary. "There is talk of making Coach Johansen the permanent coach of the Rosenborg II team." Follow current novels on [n/o/\(v\)/3l/b\(\(in\).\(co/m\)](http://n/o/(v)/3l/b((in).(co/m))

"Wasn't he already confirmed as the head of the NF academy instead of the Rosenborg under-19s?"

"Yes." Paul nodded. "But that's all ancient history. Rosenborg's Board of Directors wants to appoint him as the coach of the second team. This match may be a test set for him by the club officials. That means if we lose, he may cut most of the players from the academy team. I'm sure you won't be affected because of your exceptional talent." He smiled ruefully. "However, the rest of us will be in deep trouble."

Zachary frowned. "Are the rest of the players aware of this?"

"Nope. I just heard this from my agency." Paul sighed. "They warned me to perform my best today because of that."

"I'll do my best." Zachary smiled. "Let's hope luck is on our side today. Taking our team into consideration, we have a real chance of winning. We only need to find a way to score."

Zachary had realized that the NF academy had a relatively strong under-18 team over the past year. The defense was almost on par with the Rosenborg under-19s'. The only challenge they faced was a lack of

strikers. The only forwards on the roster were Kim Riksvold and Paul Otterson. Coach Johansen's only resort was to use the 5-4-1 formation to cover that defect.

"Just do your best, Zach," Paul implored as they walked out of the tunnel into the pitch. "The continuation of our blissful life in the academy hinges on this game. It's even more important than the one against the Rosenborg seniors." He patted Zachary's shoulder and rushed off towards the technical area.

Zachary sighed as he glanced at the departing back of his flatmate. He'd even forgotten that he was in an annual review—testing the performance of the players. If their performance didn't meet the required standards during the review week, the academy would release them and politely advise them to try their talents elsewhere. Zachary wasn't worried since he was already assured of his position in Rosenborg when he turned 18. As long as he wasn't involved in a terrible scandal or accident, the academy wouldn't release him. Mr. Stein had already assured him about that.

"Zach," A deep voice sounded from behind him as he was still in contemplation. He turned around only to find Magnus Blakstad, the other central midfielder selected for that day's game, standing behind him. The number six was very tall, a clear head higher than most people Zachary would consider tall.

"What is it?" Zachary inquired. He had never been close to the midfielder since they attended different schools.

"I'll cover the whole of the defensive midfield," Magnus said, smiling. "Just concentrate on attacking. We need to win this game."

Zachary nodded. "I believe that we should be able to win. But watch out for Ole's passes. Otherwise, we will have no chance of emerging victorious."

"That's true," Magnus concurred. "We can't win this game unless we deal with Ole's passes. But they will also have to deal with you if they want to win this game. Just look around and see how the Rosenborg players are stealing wary glances at you." He grinned, pointing towards the other half of the pitch.

Zachary turned around and noticed that his old acquaintances, in their Rosenborg black and white jerseys, were glowering at him with a burning urge to compete. The likes of Mushaga, Ole, Jonas, Asen, Christopher, Fredrick, and a few other players Zachary did not recognize were already standing in their

positions. They had arrayed themselves into a 3-5-2 formation, showing their intention to play an attacking game against the NF academy.

FWEEEEEEE!

The referee blew his whistle, signaling for all the players to take their position. The match between Rosenborg II and the NF academy was finally beginning.

Zachary's mood lifted. It had been a full year since he last partook in a serious soccer game. He was eager to test his skills against the Rosenborg second team.

"It finally begins," Magnus grinned. "Let's have a good game," He pumped fists with Zachary before running back to his position.

Chapter 34 - Against Rosenborg's Second Team

The game went exactly as Coach Johansen had anticipated in the first ten minutes. Rosenborg's second team kicked off the game and maintained possession as they bore down on NF academy's goal.

All their players were able to retain the ball and pass it around quickly. They could advance steadily towards the goal without giving the academy players a chance to win possession. Their teamwork frustrated Zachary and his teammates via compactness and narrowness.

The Troll Kids were playing the Tiki-Taka Barcelona style.

They were arrayed in a 3-5-2 formation with three men in the middle of the pack supported by two wingers. Ole Selnø, Gjermund Jensen, and Fredrik Midtsjø were the core players in their midfield. The three midfielders controlled the overall pace of the game with their tight ball skills.

However, the boys in white and black seemed wary of Zachary. They played around him instead of through him in the midfield. They so often chose to pass the ball instead of dribbling and facing off against him and his teammates.

But that wasn't the most threatening peculiarity about Rosenberg's team arrangement and game plan. Any one of their three central midfielders would occasionally burst forward and threaten the NF academy's box.

Rosenborg's second team created their first clear chance of the game in the 10th minute in such a manner. Ole Selnes, who was supposed to be playing the defensive midfield role, exploded forth. He played a one-two with Trond Olsen—the left-winger after receiving a fast pass from Fredrik Midtsj?.

The duo bypassed Magnus Blakstad and penetrated deep into the half of NF academy with their smooth passing. Ole made a quick through pass to Mushaga, who was making a run behind the three center backs before they managed to react to the swift change in the game's pace.

The Rosenborg striker dashed into the box and found himself one-on-one with Kendrick Otterson, the goalkeeper. However, as he raised his foot, preparing to shoot, a swift silhouette came—sliding in and poked the ball out of play with a green boot.

The referee blew the whistle and pointed to the corner flag.

Zachary had saved the NF academy from conceding an early goal. He was the only player on the academy team who had reacted swiftly to Rosenberg's change of pace and sudden attack. He was in the central midfield when the attack started, but he'd managed to run more than 40 yards, catch up with Mushaga, and tackle the ball.

Mushaga regarded Zachary, who was in the process of getting up from the ground, with a frown. "It seems like you've gotten faster and better over the past year." He mumbled.

"That was simply luck," Zachary lied.

Of course, he wouldn't tell his opponent that he was capable of predicting their offensive tactics. His high game intelligence supported by the Zinedine-Visual-Juju had helped him analyze the patterns in Rosenberg's play. He'd been able to infer that Mushaga would receive the final ball instead of John Chibuike—Rosenborg's second striker.

Mushaga creased a brow as he continued eyeing Zachary. "Whether that was a fluke, or you could predict our passes, that means nothing in today's game," the striker stated. "You'll lose no matter how well you play. How many times can you defend against our attacks? Wait and see." He smiled softly before walking away.

Zachary could tell that the striker was attempting to burden him mentally and affect his game. He gave his comments no mind and readied himself to defend the corner.

Zachary frowned at Lars Togstad, who had just returned to the box. "Don't allow their strikers to make runs behind you. Wasn't that what the coach said? What are you people doing in defense?"

"They were too fast with their transition," the center-back said, smiling sheepishly. "But it won't happen again. I can promise you that." He thumped his chest.

"Great." Zachary nodded. "But maintain a proper backline throughout the match. You should command the rest of the defenders to move up-and-down the field in unison in all defensive situations. Only then can we lay a good offside trap and prevent their fast attacks from threatening our box." He advised the number-4.

Zachary had noticed that Mushaga would have been offside if Robin Jatta, the left center-back, hadn't dropped back and played him onside. He didn't expect such a rookie mistake from defenders in a professional academy.

"Don't worry," Lars assured. "We'll do our best for the rest of the game. Let's defend the corner first."

The defender seemed like an easy-going person. Zachary was glad that he'd listened to his reminder with a positive attitude.

Jonas Svensson, Rosenborg's right-winger, delivered a teasing ball from the corner into the box, starting the replay. Simen Wangberg, the tall center-back, outjumped NF academy's defense to meet the resulting corner and headed the ball right down towards the middle of the goal. However, his long-range header was not powerful enough, and Kendrick Otterson, the goalkeeper, made a comfortable save.

"Kendrick," Zachary yelled, dashing out of the box. "Quickly throw the ball to Kim."

Kendrick did not dilly-dally. On hearing Zachary's instruction, he made a long throw towards the touchline where Kim Riksvold, NF academy's left-winger, was waiting. Zachary and most of his teammates took off swiftly towards the other side of the pitch after the ball.

Kim, in the left-wing, controlled the ball beautifully close to the centerline. However, two of Rosenberg's players who hadn't partaken in the corner kick boxed him in. They surrounded him and forced him to pass the ball back to Zachary. Rosenberg had managed to stop NF academy's counter attack successfully.

Zachary received Kim's pass as he stepped into the midfield. He was calm as his eyes were—focused on the field before him. He controlled the ball with a deft touch and dashed towards Rosenberg's half with an explosion of long strides.

Although he hadn't touched the ball in the first ten minutes, he'd been observing and analyzing the entire game situation. The right-wing was open, like a highway, inviting Zachary's pass.

Zachary did not hesitate and whipped the ball towards Kasongo, in the right-wing. The short winger latched on to the precise long pass and took off towards the opponent's goal as if his life depended on it.

However, Christoffer Aasbak, the left-back, was instantly on him, forcing him to head towards the corner flag instead of the box. To make the situation worse, Gjermund ?sen, one of Rosenberg's three core midfielders, also rushed towards the wing to support his teammate. The two players surrounded Kasongo and forced him to lose possession soon after. The only attack of NF academy in the game, so far, had resulted in nothing.

For the next few minutes, the game situation remained the same. Rosenberg's second team dominated play and possession, forcing the NF academy to stay put in their half.

Fortunately, the NF academy's defenders were alert and managed to swat most of Rosenberg's attempts at goal. They worked hand-in-hand to set up plenty of offside traps for Rosenberg's two forwards. Mushaga had already been offside three times by the twentieth minutes of the game. The game remained in a stalemate.

However, Zachary soon realized a problem. The Rosenberg defense and midfield always swatted their few counter-attacks with ease.

The Troll Kids had a basic defensive shape, denying Zachary and his team any possession or penetration through the center. The Rosenberg players were compact vertically and horizontally the few times when Zachary was on the ball.

When Zachary would receive a pass in the midfield, Jonas Svensson or Trond Olsen, the wingers of Rosenberg, would pinch into the half-spaces. They would close off his horizontal passing routes on either side of the pitch.

The central midfielders would—then collapse and form a narrow triangle in the middle of the field, blocking any spaces that he would have utilized to make runs through the middle.

It seemed like Rosenberg's strategy was to mark the spaces around him instead of man-marking him. They knew that Zachary was good. They could only limit his impact on the game with their perfect team play.

Zachary could only resort to making long passes into the wings or to the forwards. However, Rosenberg's well-organized midfield and defense would easily box in the forwards and the wingers when they received his passes. The Troll Kids would effortlessly force them towards the touchline, preventing them from threatening their goal.

After Zachary understood their tactics, he called Kasongo over and whispered in his ear. He then ran back to the midfield and readied himself to receive the ball from his goalkeeper.

Mushaga had just made another long-range effort at goal. He'd struck the ball towards goal from the edge of the 18-yard box. However, his shot had flashed inches wide of the right post. The NF academy was on tenterhooks.

Zachary ran out of the midfield towards the right-wing abruptly when Kendrick was about to take the goal-kick. "Pass here," he shouted, swapping numbers with Kasongo.

"Zachary" Coach Johansen yelled from the sideline. "Go back to the midfield. What are you doing in the wings?"

Kendrick didn't seem to hear the coach's words. He whipped the ball to Zachary right away.

Zachary controlled the ball with his left foot in the right-wing—and then took off like the wind. He penetrated the opponent's half soon after.

A sense of anxiety built within him as he heard Coach Johansen yelling from the sidelines. However, he calmed himself since he trusted his vision and game intelligence. Zachary believed his decision to swap positions with Kasongo was right since there were no gaps to exploit in the middle of the pitch. NF academy would only get one chance to attack through the wings before the Rosenberg coaches realized they had left spaces in the sides of their formation.

"Cut him off," Zachary heard one of the midfielders yelling.

However, he shut out all the voices and continued his dash. He was fast, as fast as a bullet train. Zachary kept running and did not stop. At one point, he somehow shrugged off two simultaneous challenges from a pair of Rosenberg defenders—and still emerged with the ball.

He felt like his body was lighter as his boots flew in uniform long strides across the green. His one-year progressive overload training was showing off its wonders.

Gjermund ?sen sprung up in front of him, blocking his running path as he changed direction and cut into the pitch, heading towards Rosenberg's box. The midfielder was trying to force him to move towards the corner flag. That was what he'd been doing to Kasongo.

Zachary smiled. He expertly flicked the ball forward with his right leg before easily beating the Rosenberg midfielder for pace. From there, he continued to bear down on goal, sprinting to his left past Christoffer Aasbak.

However, the Rosenberg left-back was having none of Zachary's nonsense. He shadowed Zachary with his swift pace and tried to win the ball with a sliding tackle. The defender sent Zachary tumbling to the ground right after he'd stepped into the box.

FWEEEEEEE

The referee blew his whistle and pointed to the penalty spot.

Chapter 35 - A Penalty-Kick

"I got the ball... I got the ball," Christoffer Aasbak groaned, picking himself up from the ground and running towards the referee.

"You didn't get the ball," said the referee, a big tall bald fellow, smiling softly. He withdrew a red card from one of his shirt pockets and showed it to the Rosenberg defender.

"Ref, that isn't fair," Christopher said, but his voice somehow subdued. "He surely dived." He shook his head.

"I was right behind you. So, I'm very sure my decision is correct." The referee emphasized. "You should have thought about the consequences before making a last-man foul." He pointed towards the bench.

Zachary ignored the bickering of the referee and the defender. He picked up the ball and moved towards the penalty spot. ?rjan B?rmark, the NF academy only striker, came up to him and asked to take the penalty. However, Zachary refused and held the ball firmly. He wouldn't trust anyone else with a spot-kick that he had worked so hard to earn. If NF academy didn't acquire a goal from his effort, Zachary was sure to face Coach Johansen's wrath.

"Off you go, young fella," Zachary heard the referee instructing Christopher. "We have a game to play. You need to leave the pitch."

"The rest of you out of the box," the referee hollered. "Keeper, head back to your goal." He ordered.

In a matter of seconds, the referee had finished organizing all the players outside of Rosenberg's 18-yard box.

The only people left within the box were Zachary, standing with the ball, on the penalty spot—and Even Barli, Rosenberg's goalkeeper, in between the goalposts.

Zachary shut out all outside disturbances.

He ran his hand through the turf to get any clumps out of the way. He then placed the ball on the penalty marker, positioning it as high as possible on the grass to give himself a good chance of striking it clean. He wanted to ensure that no other environmental factor affected his shot.

Zachary took a few steps back after noticing that the referee was already in position and about to blow the whistle. He continued muting out everything else and only focused on the penalty kick.

Meanwhile, he didn't forget to stare down the keeper who was jumping around, waving his arms, and acting confidently on his line. Zachary smirked—just a small pouting of the lips, a narrowing of the eyes, and a tilting of the head. He was as calm as a well of stars and wasn't intimidated by the keeper in any way.

FWEEEEEEE

The referee blew the whistle, signaling for Zachary to take the penalty.

Zachary ran slowly towards the ball before jumping high and placing his left foot next to the ball. All the while, he kept his sight fixed on the ball without looking at the goalkeeper. He then kicked the ball underneath—with the inside of his right foot, just a small nudge of moderate power, for elevation.

Zachary showed his unique vision and gently flicked the ball to the opposite side of where the keeper had dived. In the 22nd minute, the NF academy had scored the first goal of the match. 1:0. Unexpectedly, Rosenberg's second team was trailing.

Hope bloomed inside Zachary as he celebrated the goal with the rest of his teammates. With Rosenberg a man down, he could finally see a possibility of the NF academy winning the game.

"High pressing... high pressing formation for the rest of the half," Zachary heard coach Johansen yelling from the sidelines.

The NF academy players arrayed themselves in a 3-4-3 formation on hearing Coach Johansen's instructions. P?vind Alseth and Martin Lundal, the right and left-backs, moved up the pitch, towards the midfield. Kasongo and Kim, the wingers, advanced further towards the opponent's box to support P?rjan in striking. That was the only way they could pressure the opponent's defense on the other side of the pitch.

High pressing tactics required Zachary and his teammates to hungrily press the opponents in their half and win back possession as soon as possible whenever they lost the ball. They had to stop Rosenberg's passing within their half. Only then could they nip attacks in the bud and dictate gameplay.

Zachary was not surprised by Coach Johansen's change of tactics. The NF academy could capitalize on their numerical advantage and constantly threaten the Rosenberg goal if they became bold enough to attack more often. They had to act before the Rosenberg coaches reacted to Christopher's red card and reorganized their formations.

For the next few minutes, Zachary upped his game. He didn't make any more long runs but just started supplying his teammates with passes to dominate gameplay.

He conquered the midfield and became the link between defense and attack. He was always in a position to receive and pass the ball before the Rosenberg midfielders could react to his plays. With two more forwards in front of him, Zachary had more options when on the ball. Occasionally, he would send in deadly through balls to the three forwards.

In the 38th minute, Zachary chipped the ball over Rosenberg's defense after making a yard for himself in the midfield. Kasongo picked up the pass in the right-wing and sent the ball into the penalty area. P?rjan B?rmark jumped high to meet the resultant cross and planted a header from inside the box. However, the striker's effort smashed off the right post. Rosenberg's second team had just survived a second goal.

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"Zachary is getting better by the day," Coach Bj?rn Peters commented. "I now get why the Rosenberg officials place so much importance on him."

Coach Johansen was silent for a moment, then nodded. "He sure is talented. But his habit of deviating from the game plan will cause him problems someday."

"But he did score." Coach Bjørn smiled. "There was no one else who could have exploited the gaps in the wings as well as he did. His pace and dribbling skills have improved over the past year."

"That's the only reason he's off the hook. If he'd lost the ball along the way, the gap left by him in the midfield would have caused us a lot of trouble." Coach Johansen sounded casual.

The two coaches were standing on the sidelines watching the game. NF academy was dictating the pace of the match with their numerical advantage.

Zachary had just gotten to a rebound, from a corner ball, at the edge of the box. He smashed the ball towards the right side of the goal, beating Even Barli, and scoring the second goal. It was not yet the second half, but Rosenborg was surprisingly already 2:0 down. The academy coaches were under no pressure and conversing at a leisurely pace.

"Don't you think that it's a waste to leave Zachary behind for the Riga Cup?" Coach Bjørn inquired, his tone dubious. "With him, we have a real chance of winning for the first time. That could attract a lot more talented students to the academy."

"I know that." Coach Johansen nodded. "I've seen his free-kicks during training. If he perfects his set-pieces, we could threaten the giant academies during the Riga Cup. However, I need to convince that old man before the Rosenborg officials allow us to utilize him in the competition." Coach Johansen sighed, pulling at his red beard.

"Why is that?"

"The sporting director of Rosenborg doesn't want Zachary playing out of the country for the meantime," Coach Johansen replied. "They're afraid that other clubs in Europe will poach him before he even gets to play for Rosenborg. Only Mr. Stein can permit him to play in the cup since he oversees all of Zachary's affairs here in Norway."

Coach Bjørn frowned. "That's a challenge. You don't seem to get along with Mr. Stein. Will he allow it?"

Coach Johansen remained silent. He was focused on the match at that juncture. Zachary had just sent in a fine through ball towards the Rosenborg box, catching their center-backs unaware. Kim Riksvold collected the ball at the edge of the box—and released a tremendous shot towards the bottom right corner of the goal. However, Rosenborg's goalkeeper anticipated the attempt and made a brilliant save.

"Don't worry," Coach Johansen intoned after watching the game action. "I'll find a way for him to join us. Just register him as part of the team partaking in the Riga Cup. Leave the rest to me."

Chapter 36 - A Landslide Victory

Coach Johansen substituted Paul Otterson in at the beginning of the second half. The Swede replaced Kasongo on the right-wing.

Even though the NF academy held a numerical advantage over Rosenborg's second team, the coach didn't dare replace any midfielders or defenders. He still seemed wary of Rosenborg despite being two goals ahead.

Once Otterson got on the pitch, he ran up to Zachary and said: "Zach! I need to score. I need plenty of passes from you." He was breathing hard and all sweaty despite being on the pitch for only a few minutes. He seemed very anxious to perform in that day's game.

"Relax and play your game," Zachary advised his flatmate. "The coaches only need to see that you have improved over the past year. Go to your position and wait for my passes." Zachary smiled softly.

The NF academy continued dominating the rest of the game. Even the players who had gone unnoticed in the first half started impacting the match. The left and right backs were both heavily involved in the gameplay and made several runs across the wings during the second half. They played more like wingers than defenders and sent several precise crosses into Rosenborg's box.

However, the Troll Kids had reorganized their defense over the halftime. They adjusted their formation to four defenders, four midfielders, and one striker. Eight of their men were always behind the ball, leaving no scoring opportunities for the NF academy players despite how well they played.

The score remained 2:0 until the 86th minute.

Zachary exploited a gap left by the Rosenberg players—and made another one of his signature-runs through the central midfield.

He picked a loose pass midway inside the center circle, knocked the ball past Ole, outpaced Gjermund ?sen, and was then in the clear, galloping towards Rosenberg's goal.

From there, he set off on a mazy run, dribbling towards four of the Rosenberg defenders. The defenders looked both confused and mesmerized and were unable to challenge him. He quickly found himself at the edge of the box.

When an angle opened up, he lifted his right leg to hit the ball towards the goal. However, two of the defenders jumped-up, while their counterparts slid in to block his shot. They were that afraid of him since he had already scored a long-range effort from that same spot in the first half.

Out of the corner of his eye, Zachary noticed a familiar shadow rush by towards his right. Without taking a glance—to confirm whether the shadow belonged to a teammate or an opponent, he expertly flicked the ball towards the running path of the silhouette. All the while, his eyes were glued to the defenders.

No look—pass.

"Shit!" Zachary heard Simen Wangberg, one of the defenders, swear. The Rosenberg players were—still caught up in their jumps and sliding tackles. They were already committed to blocking Zachary's shot and couldn't readjust in time to defend against the new threat.

Zachary's little pass had taken all the defenders out of the equation, leaving Paul Otterson, NF academy's winger, unmarked on the right side of the box.

The Rosenberg keeper came out to meet him, but before he could get close to the ball, the Swede, who was tumbling to the ground at the time, flicked it over him with his right foot into the net. 3:0. The NF academy was three goals ahead of the Rosenberg B team in the 87th minute.

"GOAALLLLL." Paul ran to the sidelines, shouting and pumping his legs, before doing a few backflips towards the corner flag.

Zachary's mouth twitched noticeably on seeing the high profile celebration of his flatmate. The Swede had celebrated like there was no tomorrow—like he had scored a World Cup winner.

"Go back to your half and defend. Go back...", Coach Johansen shouted from the sidelines.

The NF academy players reorganized themselves into their starting formation on hearing the Coach's instructions. But this was not before Paul came up to Zachary and said: "Nice pass. Thank you."

Zachary shrugged. "All the credit goes to you for the nice run off their defenders. We may not have scored otherwise."

"Any chance you can send me another good pass in the remaining minutes?" Paul grinned. "I would like to score another goal." He whispered.

Zachary looked at his flatmate sharply. "Do you think their midfielders will let me repeat that?" He asked. "Go back to your position and try to fall back and defend when they are attacking. The minutes after scoring are the most dangerous. We need to be careful and keep a clean sheet."

The winger returned to his position—and the match restarted soon after. The Rosenborg players seemed to have received a wake-up call after conceding. They switched their strategy from just defending and started using long balls targeted at Mushaga, their lone striker.

In the 90th minute, Ole Selnes produced a superb long pass from deep within his half. A mistake—a miskick, from one of the defenders, gifted a chance to a lurking Mushaga. The Rosenborg striker kept his cool and let loose a right-footed shot—that was saved by Kendrick Otterson's extended fingertips. The referee blew his whistle and pointed to the corner.

"Concentrate... Concentrate," Coach Johansen shouted from the sidelines. "The match is not yet done." He sounded angry.

The NF academy players successfully defended the corner. Magnus Blakstad outjumped all the players and headed the ball away from the box after beating his mark.

Ole fired in a rebound from the edge of the box. However, Lars Togstad, one of the academy's center-backs, blocked the resulting carpet shot, sending the ball back towards the midfield.

Three players in dark blue jerseys took off at lightning speed, chasing after it. Zachary was ahead of them. Fists, arms, and legs swinging, he dashed towards the ball that was yet to land in the right-wing.

Tunnel vision set in as he focused solely on the ball that had just bounced on the ground. The cleats of his boots dug into the fine grass of Lerkendal training ground as he upped his speed and beat everyone—including the opposing defenders to the ball. His A+ agility was no joke at the academy level of soccer. Although he wasn't the fastest, he could easily beat most of his peers for pace.

The ball was mid bounce when he reached it. Zachary didn't pause to control the ball. He bent down slightly and headed it to the front without slowing down one bit.

His deft first touch with his head took him past one defender. Before long, he was sprinting away from a second, and suddenly—seemingly had miles of empty space ahead of him in the right-wing.

Gjermund ?sen, a midfielder who hadn't taken part in the corner-kick, came rushing in to close the ball down, but in so doing, came face to face with Zachary. He had his arms spread out wide like a defending basketball player. His eyes burnt with intensity and his body posture warned Zachary he would use whatever means to take him out no matter the consequences.

Zachary frowned but did not decelerate. He fed the ball past the Rosenborg boy and then left the pitch immediately, taking up the outside lane. ?sen, as most defending midfielders would, sidestepped towards Zachary, hoping to block him off or maybe even upend him.

However, his efforts were futile.

Zachary kept running wider, navigating around ?sen, speeding faster and faster towards the ball. He left the midfielder in the dust and stepped back into the pitch without slowing his pace.

Zachary's lungs screamed for simple breath as he cut diagonally into the pitch and dashed towards the box, with no defender to block his advance. He kept running though, each step mattered. Then, before he knew it, he was almost into the box.

The keeper came out to greet him. Zachary quickly glanced around him for the first time since starting his run. He noticed that the tall Magnus Blakstad had almost matched his pace with his long strides. He had just stepped into the arc of the 18-yard box.

He was at the lead of a pack of players, all chasing after Zachary.

Zachary didn't think twice and just prodded the ball into his path. Magnus coolly slotted the ball into the back of the empty net, bringing NF academy's tally to four goals for that day.

The tall man ran up to Zachary and tried to lift him in a celebratory hug after scoring. However, Zachary wriggled out of his embrace before the rest of the players could join the celebration and smother him.

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"Don't you think he's more of a winger than a midfielder?" Coach Bjørn inquired as he glanced at the celebrating academy players.

Coach Johansen cleared his throat. "He plays both positions well. We need to advise him on where to focus most of his efforts. I don't want him wasting his time training for more than one position. I think midfield suits him best since he likes passing the ball even when faced with the keeper one-on-one." The coach had a rare smile plastered on his face.

"We could just try him in the wing and see how he fares against the Rosenborg senior players next Friday," suggested Coach Bjørn. "We need to make sure he's playing in the right position at this critical stage of his career." He added.

"I'll think about it," Coach Johansen said before returning his attention to the match.

The match ended with a score of 4:0 in favor of NF academy.

Chapter 37 - The Strength Of A Professional Team

The following Friday.

The autumn afternoon sun bathed Lerkendal Idrettspark in its warm light.

In one of the training grounds in that iconic sports facility of Trondheim, the NF academy faced off against the Rosenborg senior team.

The match had almost no suspense or tension.

Whether it was the teamwork or quality and experience of players, there was no way the NF academy could triumph over the Rosenborg senior team. Even the majority of academy players harbored no illusions of winning the game.

Rosenborg Ballklub was a giant among the clubs in Norway. The team had won 13 consecutive titles—10 under manager Nils Arne Eggen between 1991 through 2004. Rosenborg had even participated in the European Champions League and defeated big clubs like AC Milan. There was no way that 1st-team players of a club with such a rich history could suffer defeat at the hands of a fledgling squad from an associated academy.

Stories of David defeating Goliath were rare in team games like soccer. The game proceeded as expected, with the Rosenborg senior team completely suppressing Zachary and his teammates.

Rosenborg subscribed to an attacking philosophy similar to what their second team had done, faced with the academy, the previous Friday.

Rosenborg's gameplay was driven by teamwork rather than individual brilliance. They moved the ball around the pitch with precise passes and positioned themselves following a textbook perfect 4-4-2 formation. Their team chemistry was remarkable, with each player seemingly aware of their teammates' position, even without looking towards them.

Zachary was outplayed in the midfield—just because the Rosenborg midfielders could easily pass the ball around him without needing to square off against him. Fredrik Winsnes and Bo?ek Do?kal (Rosenborg's central midfielders) passed the ball quickly into the wings before Zachary got any chance to close them down. They were disciplined and tactically aware, always making sure that they did not leave their defense exposed. Zachary found almost no space to exploit during the match.

Rosenborg was attacking with a maximum player count of four, the wingers always moving forward to support the two strikers. They worked in tandem with the wing-backs, creating 2-versus-1 situations when advancing towards NF academy's half.

On several occasions, they let loose teasing crosses into the NF academy's box, creating problems for the academy team. The inexperienced academy defenders couldn't halt the advance of the speedy wingers and backs.

Steffen Iversen and Rade Prica, the strikers, lead the attack in Rosenborg's 4-4-2 formation. They weighed heavily on the defenders, coordinating their movements between each other to throw the academy defense out of balance. The two were lethal with a good sense of positioning, always outjumping and beating the academy defenders to the crosses—from the wings.

Rade Prica scored two goals with headers after latching on to teasing crosses delivered by the swift wingers in the 12th and 20th minute. Steffen Iversen added to the academy's sorrow by scoring in the 40th minute. He smashed the ball, past Kendrick Otterson, into the back of the net—after he'd latched on to a lofted pass into the box.

By the end of the first half, the academy team was already three goals down. The Rosenborg team had a ball possession of about 80%, by Zachary's estimation.

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"You guys played a shitty game," Coach Johansen complained to the players in the dressing room. Zachary and his teammates were in the half-time break, listening to the coach's instructions.

"Especially the wing-backs. I'm not happy with your performance. How could you allow wingers to release all those crosses into our box?" The coach frowned at Øyvind Alseth and Martin Lundal.

"Their wingers are not making any fancy runs or dribbles. Just try blocking their crosses, and everything will be fine." The coach scowled at the two wing-backs.

All the players remained silent as they waited for their Coach to continue. Some chugged down water from their bottles while others sat languidly, with bleary-eyes, on the benches in the dressing room. They fanned themselves with their sweat-drenched shirts. The NF academy players looked overly exhausted despite only playing a single half against Rosenborg.

"The game isn't over yet," Coach Johansen continued. "I want to remind you that you'll get a chance to join the Rosenborg squad if you perform well in this game. You should have noticed Trond Henriksen, the assistant coach of Rosenborg, on the touchline. He isn't here just as a coach of the first team, but to scout for potential seedlings to be nurtured by the club. So, you have to perform well or ready yourself to join third-tier clubs." The coach paused, letting his gaze roam over the players.

"One more thing," the coach intoned. "We'll be using your performance in this game to determine which players will be released by the academy in this year's review. And, we are also selecting the main squad for the Riga Cup. If you do well, you'll get the chance to head to Latvia and test your skills against academies from the rest of Europe..."

The Coach continued using both promises and threats to motivate the players during the half time break. Zachary sat on the floor in the corner, munching on some fried peanuts. He had wanted to compete against the senior players of Rosenborg. However, his teammates lacked the physical capability and technical skills to challenge the experienced top league players.

Zachary had to find a way to score, or he would fail a system mission and lose 160 Juju-points as a penalty by the system.

Before the match, he'd accepted a mission to score a goal during the game. The rewards included 80 juju points, enough to buy him a few elixirs in the system shop. He wanted to purchase a few doses of the physical conditioning elixir to help train his agility to the next level in the following few months.

Zachary had realized he could become a formidable player if he could improve one of his physical stats to the S grade. His agility stat was the current focus for improvement.

If he could further increase his speed, he would possess the required arsenal to destroy defenders even at the professional level. Being suppressed by the Rosenborg players in the first half had only strengthened his resolve.

The Zinedine Visual Juju relied a great deal on teammates to work its magic in a match. With strong teammates, he could stand out with his passes and vision, heavily impacting the game. However, if his teammates performed below par, he too would be affected. Zachary needed skills that could enable him to perform despite the condition of his teammates. Dribbling and speed were his best options at that moment.

"Zach," Coach Johansen called out to him, breaking his reverie. "Are you with us?" The coach frowned.

"Yes, coach," Zachary replied, correcting his posture by sitting upright. He didn't want to give his coach the impression that he had given up on the match.

Coach Johansen looked at Zachary sharply. "Swap positions with Kim and play on the left-wing during the second half. Leave the defense for the rest and concentrate solely on attacking. You'll get a few chances to run at the defenders. Use them wisely and try to test their keeper before the game ends." The coach instructed.

"Coach, what about the midfield?" Magnus asked, on hearing the coach's instructions. He was the defensive midfielder and was right to be worried about Zachary's swap. Removing Zachary from the midfield would increase his workload for the game.

"Kim will play with you in the midfield," Coach Johansen replied. "Your only role is to defend and prevent the Rosenborg players from threatening our box through the middle. If you happen to win the ball, release it towards Zachary in the wings. We need to score at least one goal before the match ends."

Magnus frowned but kept silent. The coach's words in the dressing room were law.

"Kasongo." The coach turned to the short guy. "I need you to keep falling back and help in the defense against their wingers. You can switch wings with Zachary if there are opportunities he needs to exploit via the right-wing. Understood?"

"Yes, coach," Kasongo replied.

Chapter 38 - A Clinical Player

The second half started soon after. Rosenberg's senior team maintained its dominance. The club outplayed the academy players, leaving them with no chance to create scoring opportunities for themselves.

They dictated the gameplay and created several other chances at goal in the first 30 minutes of the 2nd half. However, the NF academy had arrayed into something similar to an 8-2 formation.

Their five defenders and three midfielders all defended desperately against Rosenberg's attacks in their half. Eight men were always behind the ball as they withstood attack after attack from the senior team. Even ?rjan B?rmark, the lone striker, helped in the defensive midfield. Their efforts paid off—and they did not concede another goal.

Zachary was the only forward on the center-line in the left-wing. He was guarded by Jim Larsen, one of Rosenberg's center backs, the entire time.

"You guys are boring," Jim Larsen said, pretending to yawn. "How did you manage to put four goals past our under-19 team? It seems like they were sleeping the whole game. Those kids!" The defender's tone was somewhat dramatic.

Zachary didn't reply. He had no verbal counter for the defender's jabs. He had waited for the entire half without touching the ball. The NF Academy hadn't gotten any shot on goal from the beginning of the second half.

Zachary had wanted to return to his half—to help his teammates, instead of conversing with the Rosenberg defenders. However, Coach Johansen continued reminding him to cool his heels without backing the defense. His only role was to wait for the ball and utilize whatever chances could come along his way—however scarce they were. The opportunities were close to none except in the latter part of the half.

In the 80th minute, Zachary finally received a pass from Magnus that had caught the Rosenberg players off-guard. The incoming ball was not the best. However, it bounced in the open space in the left-wing and could be contested by anyone.

Zachary's blood boiled with excitement as adrenaline flooded his veins. He set off before Jim Larsen could react and bolted towards the ball. That split-second faster-reaction was all that mattered to leave the Rosenberg center-back in the dust.

In a flash, he reached the ball before it went out of play—and raced towards the Rosenberg box. He cut into the pitch unobstructed since the Rosenberg players had all been attacking in the other half, except for their two center backs.

Per Rønning, the other center-back came running diagonally to close down Zachary. But the number-5 had made a mistake, attempting to close down Zachary with his back facing him. Zachary flicked the ball back and forth between his left and right feet as he advanced wavily towards the Rosenberg box.

Per Rønning kept backing off while turning from side to side until it was too late. Zachary had dribbled past the center back with just a simple change of pace and was one-on-one with the keeper. The chasing defenders could not keep up with him once he got past them.

A feint then sent him around goalkeeper Daniel Rølund and allowed him to slot the ball into the empty net. 3:1. The NF academy had finally put one past the Rosenberg defense despite having only one shot at goal the entire match.

"DING"

Zachary couldn't contain his happiness as he heard the familiar system notification going off within his mind. He'd completed the system mission and scored a goal. He finally had enough capital to purchase some elixirs from the system shop for his next training plan.

Trond Henriksen, the assistant coach of Rosenberg, approached Coach Boyd Johansen after Zachary had scored the goal.

"That's one clinical player," Coach Henriksen said, without bothering with any greetings. The two coaches had already met before the match began. "His efficiency and ball handling are at the level of the first team. Was he that fast when he joined?"

Coach Johansen removed his attention from the celebrating academy players and smiled. "I don't think so." He shook his head. "He has been improving rapidly over the past year. He's a very hard-working kid. I'm sure he'll continue to get faster and better over the coming year."

"Seems like Mr. Stein's vision is still as sharp as ever." Coach Henriksen nodded. "How old is he now?"

"16 years and making 17 in a few months. Our doctors have already confirmed his skeletal age."

"So, about one more year to go," Coach Henriksen mumbled, returning his attention to the match.

Zachary's goal seemed to have poked a hornets' nest. Rosenborg attacked with newfound vigor, applying immense pressure on the NF academy team. The balls smashed off goalposts—shots missed by mere inches, as the senior team bore down on the academy's goal.

However, the goddess of luck seemed to be on the side of the NF academy. The team narrowly survived conceding goals in the final minutes of the game. The game ended 3:1 in favor of Rosenborg. However, NF academy had managed to score with only a single shot at the goal, courtesy of Zachary Bemba.

"We have reviewed your request," Coach Henriksen intoned after the referee blew the final whistle. "The team management also wants him to gain some experience from international matches." The coach smiled. "However, we require a commitment from him before he travels out of the country. He should understand that we are investing in him as a potential Rosenborg player. We don't want to hear he's run off to another club after the tournament in Riga. You can work out the details with Mr. Stein on how to handle this."

"Thank you," Coach Johansen said, smiling.

"Will you be taking your position on the second team right away?" Coach Henriksen inquired, diverting the topic away from Zachary.

"Not yet." Coach Johansen shook his head. "I would like to win one of the tournaments before leaving the academy. The Riga and SIA cups will look good on my CV." The coach smiled.

Coach Henriksen gave his colleague an arch look. "You're that sure that you'll win? Those are tournaments with serious club academies like Manchester City, PSV, Valencia, and Atalanta."

Coach Johansen half-smiled. "With Zachary, we have a pretty good chance."

"What plans do you have for him?"

"We'll design a good training plan for him to improve his speed and ball-handling over the next few months. By February, his pace should be at another level if he continues progressing."

"Just don't forget to run everything by old man Stein," Coach Henriksen warned.

Coach Johansen frowned but nodded after a moment of deliberation.

Chapter 39 - The System Shop

Nightfall came with a whisper of perfect black that grew into a soothing chorus of stars.

Zachary and his three flatmates rode their bikes back to Moholt. Coach Johansen had dismissed them right after the match—only after a brief address. The boys were in a somber mood as they mulled over the parting words of the academy coach.

"Do you think the coach will go ahead and still cut out some players despite our victory over the Rosenborg reserve team last Friday?" Kasongo asked, reducing his speed and matching pace with Zachary.

"I highly doubt that," Zachary replied, matter-of-factly. "The coaches need players for the Riga Cup at the beginning of February. Our team only has sixteen players remaining. Cutting more players before the new year would cripple the team."

Paul Otterson half-smiled. "You say that because you were not here two years back. Coach Johansen cut loose more than ten under-17 players from the academy. He has no obligation to train a full team of players until they join the under-19 teams."

"Aahh!" Kasongo shouted in frustration. "The suspense of not knowing is killing me. Will I be cut from the team or not? Why didn't the coach announce the results today? That's all I can think about."

"I think Zachary has a point," Kendrick Otterson cut in. "We need a team for Riga. Factoring in our performance over the two matches, we're not in any danger."

The four boys fell into line as they rounded a corner and rode their bikes past Bunnpris Supermarket, heading into the narrow path leading to their flat. It was a Friday evening. University students from N.T.N.U were all over the place, probably attending one of their weekend parties. They all held little beers in their hands and swayed to the loud music blaring out of a tiny basement underneath one of the apartments.

"When will I join campus and start enjoying such parties?" Paul Otterson sighed as the group of four rode their bikes past the rowdy students.

"Instead of thinking about how to improve your ball handling, you're daydreaming about basement parties." Kendrick scowled at his brother. "I'll support the coach's decision if he cuts you from the team tomorrow." He harrumphed.

"We need to put more effort into our training." Kasongo sighed. "The match with the Rosenborg senior team was a wake-up call."

"Only Zachary could hold his own somewhat against them," Paul chipped in, shaking his head. "But I was relieved when we conceded only three goals. Before the match began, I was afraid we would concede more than six."

Paul reduced his speed and fell beside Zachary, who was riding at the back. "Zach! Why don't we start joining you on your physical training exercises?" He inquired—grinning.

Zachary gave his flatmate a soft smile. "You're welcome to join. But be warned, I won't babysit you. I'll be moving out at six tomorrow morning for outdoor running. I'll also pass by the training ground and do some cone agility drills before breakfast." He said, his tone solemn.

He had realized that his Swedish flatmates were talented but often fell out of their training routine. That seemed to be the reason why they had remained obscure in his previous life. Zachary was eager to motivate them and see them develop their careers further. There was a chance he could cause one of those butterfly effects, changing the soccer history trajectory in his new life.

"I'll also join in," The three others answered more or less in unison. Zachary nodded. He could sense a silent resolve in their tone. It seemed like his teammates were starting to take their training more seriously. He was glad as he didn't want to see them turn into failures at a sport they loved as he had in his previous life.

The boys rode in silence for the rest of their short journey to the flat. When they reached their apartment, they quickly washed up and headed to their rooms to sleep. They had already eaten dinner at the academy after the match.

Zachary opened the system interface once he was safely ensconced in his room. Although he was tired and close to dozing, he wanted to plan for the next day's training after making some system purchases. He first clicked on the G.O.A.T-missions tab to check the completion status of his mission.

"DING"

#4 new messages

CONGRATULATIONS

-> You have completed the mission (Score a goal in the match against the Rosenborg senior team).

->Mission-Rewards

1) 80 Juju points

->Mission Summary

*Scored a magnificent goal against a senior professional team.

Overall Mission Rating: A+

->Bonus rewards

You have earned a total of 10 bonus Juju-points

Zachary's heart leaped with excitement. His stock of Juju points had been raised to 200 once again after the two matches against the Rosenborg teams. Each game had been a system mission that had offered him plentiful rewards of Juju-points.

He was hungry for more Juju-points after starting his daily training in the G.O.A.T skills simulator. With two Juju-points, he could train his Bend-it like Beckham Juju or his arrow shot for one hour in the system's virtual world. He could also make several purchases of elixirs from the system shop with more points. Juju-points were the system's currency.

He suppressed his excitement and opened the system shop.

*SYSTEM SHOP

->Gift Packs (locked)

->Purchase Skills

->Purchase Elixirs

->Lottery Coupons (locked)

->Inventory

Zachary tapped on the Purchase-Elixirs tab with his right forefinger. A variety of elixirs represented by different types of fruits populated the drop-down menu. Agility and vitality enhancing-elixirs of various grades were present on the list displayed on the interface. There were also mental and physical conditioning-elixirs in the shop from the D to B grades.

However, most were expensive and beyond his stock of Juju-points. The cheapest agility enhancing-elixir, which was the D grade, cost a total of 1000 Juju-points. The elixirs for vitality enhancement were—also priced in the same range. Zachary could only afford a monthly dosage of the D to C-grade physical or mental conditioning-elixirs with his 200 Juju-points. Most of the other elixirs were in grey and inaccessible to him. For instance, he couldn't see any A or S-grade elixirs on the menu.

He chose to purchase the physical conditioning elixir right away. It would significantly improve the efficiency of his training with just a monthly dose. He'd already used up the dosage rewarded to him by the system during his one-year progressive overload training.

Zachary aimed to improve his fitness and raise one of his physical stats to the S grade. Only by becoming more physically fit could he gain the capability to learn more advanced soccer skills and become a nightmare for defenders.

Physical fitness was one of the most important aspects of soccer performance. A player could go a long way in the sport with unparalleled skill. However, without the fitness part of their game, they would not be a complete player. Zachary's goal was to raise his stamina until he was capable of maintaining a high level of intensity throughout the 90-minutes of a soccer match.

But more urgently, he needed to improve his agility to the S grade. His dribbling runs had helped him beat several defenders in previous matches. He was intent on developing his dribbling skills further—till he could beat any defender in any game.

His only logical choice was the physical conditioning elixir since it would improve his agility in the short run. He couldn't afford the more effective agility-enhancing-elixirs at that moment.

After purchasing the elixir, Zachary spent four Juju-points to activate the G.O.A.T skills simulator for two hours. He carried out his daily routine of practicing the Bend-it like Beckham Juju before entering slumberland at 11 PM that night.

He had an important meeting with Coach Johansen to attend the next day.

Chapter 40 - Agility And Endurance Drills

It was a slow grey morning the next day.

Zachary started his day, as planned, by going outdoors for a run. His flatmates remained committed to their words and accompanied him during the exercise. The entire time, they struggled to keep up with his pace as he alternated between jogging and sprinting on the empty streets of Trondheim.

It was still 6 AM. The streets were devoid enough of traffic to bring about any interruptions to their run.

Zachary was training his endurance while orienting himself to running outdoors in the temperate weather. He would sprint for 100 meters and follow up with a jog for a half a kilometer as he led his flatmates around Trondheim City's streets. He was slowly acclimating himself to running during soccer matches in the harsh outdoor weather of Trondheim.

A soccer match was more like a couple of very—fast but short sprints—interspersed with slow jogging or walking. The players never ran at a constant speed during games. By copying the system's fitness missions, Zachary had tailored his endurance training to match the ever-changing pace of matches. He ran at such alternating speeds for 45 minutes, three times a week, to keep his body in top shape.

"Let's sprint the rest of the way," Zachary hollered to his flatmates as they neared the NF training grounds after the long run. He didn't wait for their responses before sprinting away.

The cold autumn humidity of Trondheim made him feel sticky. Sweat rolled down his face in thick, salty beads. His clothes, slick with perspiration, clung to his skin.

His heart throbbed inside his chest, and his skin felt like it was roasting. He began bouncing—slightly as he sprinted, which wore him out faster. But, he didn't slow down or break his run.

Perhaps a year prior, he would have balked at the idea of running so far and fast. However, at that moment, he relished the prospect. He didn't intend to break out of his training routine even for a single moment.

He was strict on himself and had never missed a day of practice over the course of his year at the academy. Consistency was everything in sports training. He was finally beginning to reap the fruits of all his hard work. He had started getting faster and less tired after his sprinting and jogging routines.

"Not this again," Paul Otterson complained after Zachary bolted away from them. The Swede's rasping throat was as parched as that of a lizard in the desert sun. His head bobbed loosely from side to side with each footfall.

"Where does Zachary get all that stamina?" Kendrick cut in, not the least bit willing to increase his pace. He was already running on a five-percent battery. His energy reserves were pretty close to running out. At least, that's what he thought.

"Let's persevere and sprint for the last minute," Kasongo stammered in between gasps of breath. His feet pounded on the tarmac with all the grace of a sack of potatoes. His graceful springing steps from five miles earlier had long disappeared.

Zachary's flatmates were all feeling spent after matching his quick pace for forty-five minutes. However, they all endured and ended the morning run with a 200-meter sprint—until they reached the academy training grounds.

Zachary took only a minute to stabilize his breathing even after alternating between sprinting and jogging for nearly an hour. To him, the exercise was just the typical morning run, a small step on his journey to improve his physique and become a great player.

He had realized that humans were creatures of habit. The more they practiced something, the more natural it became. He had long gotten used to such training routines over the course of the year. Moreover, he had taken a physical conditioning elixir before the training. He had plenty of energy reserves stored within his body.

His flatmates, on the other hand, were in a sorry state. They lay supine on the moistened artificial grass of the NF training ground, with their arms and legs spread out wide, gasping for breath like fish taken out of water. They looked exhausted beyond belief.

However, Zachary had no plans to go easy on them. His three flatmates had agreed to let him become their instructor for personalized training. He intended to fulfill his role.

"Wake up, fellas," he said, chugging down some water from his water bottle. "We need to start the agility drills and individual ball work exercises," he shouted, imitating the husky voice of Coach Johansen.

He looked at his Asahi watch and noticed that it was almost seven. Twilight had begun to melt away. The reddish-orange rays of a majestic sunrise had started seeping over the horizon. The light itself seemed to pour out from a molten sun.

"Just give us a few minutes," Kasongo said, his voice coming out quieter and in a slow monotone.

"Suit yourselves." Zachary shrugged. "I'll go ahead and begin my training before my muscles cool down. You can take your time resting. Rest is good for improving your ball skills." He mumbled, feigning anger.

"Okay, we are with you," Paul said, jumping up from the grass. The rest followed suit.

"Great. That's the spirit." Zachary smiled. "Let's set up the cones and do some drills before the coaches arrive. Kasongo, get the training ladders."

The four boys spent the next hour going through several agility enhancement exercises. They started with forward-running high-knee drills through the ladders placed in the center of the pitch. They sprinted with their knees lifting high through the ladder, landing in each space between rungs. The exercise would help improve their foot coordination and running speed with the ball.

They followed that up with lateral running—side-to-side drills. Afterward, they ran the cones and ended the session with shuttle-runs across the pitch.

Only then did they settle down to eat their packed breakfast, awaiting the arrival of Coach Johansen and the other players. It was a Saturday, so there were no classes. The only thing they had scheduled for that day was soccer training with Coach Johansen.

"Kendrick," Zachary called out to the goalkeeper once he finished his breakfast. "Can we put in some set-piece practice?" He asked. "We still have about 40 minutes before everyone else gets here."

The coaches and other players usually arrived at about 9 AM for the weekend sessions. Zachary had always been present at the training ground alone during early morning hours. That day was the only exception.

"No problem." Kendrick smiled. "Let's set-up the wall of training mannequins." He seemed to have recovered from his fatigue.