

## Greatest 41

### Chapter 41 - Coach Johansen's Advice

Zachary spent the next thirty minutes working on set-pieces with the Swedish goalkeeper. After spending more than two weeks training in both the system skills simulator and the field, he could put three out of ten freekicks into the back of the net.

He felt like he was progressing daily. His technique was improving slowly but steadily. His mastery of the Bend-it like Beckham Juju had advanced by 4.2%. He had already taken more than 200 set-pieces in the virtual simulator over the previous two weeks.

"I would advise you to add more power to your technique," a voice interrupted Zachary after he finished taking one of the freekicks. He was momentarily perplexed. He had kicked the ball with grace and sent it curling, past the wall of mannequins, into the back of the net. Kendrick had not even managed to react. Yet, someone was telling him to add more power to his technique.

Zachary turned around only to find Coach Johansen observing him. He had focused all his attention on the freekick and had failed to notice his arrival.

"Good morning, coach," he greeted.

"Good morning." Coach Johansen nodded, his face devoid of any emotion. "I see that you are early as usual. And, you brought some of your teammates along with you this time. That's good."

Zachary half-smiled, nodding. "You said I need to add more power?"

"Yes." The Coach took a few steps towards Zachary. "I can see that you are already working on your technique for freekicks. And it's disturbingly similar to David Beckham's. You must have practiced a lot to achieve that level of expertise." The coach nodded in a gesture of silent approval. "But, I've also seen you take long shots from outside the eighteen. Why not add that sort of power to your freekicks?"

"Imagine sending a powerful shot past the wall with enough curvature on the ball," Coach Johansen continued, half-smiling. "As long as it's on target, no keeper will ever have time to react to it."

Zachary nodded. "I get what you're saying. However, I need to master the technique and postures first before adding more power behind the ball." He elaborated. If he could achieve what the coach had suggested, he would have created a new world-class skill. But, training a new skill was a difficult task.

"That is a wrong approach you are taking," Coach Johansen replied. "If you were aiming to become another freekick taker like Beckham, your training would be fine. However, if you need to power-up your freekicks beyond that level, you should begin now. Otherwise, you'll find it hard to adjust your technique once all the postures and body motions have become ingrained into your muscle memory." The coach explained, stroking his red beard. "Are we clear?"

"Yes, coach," Zachary replied, smiling wryly. He understood Coach Johansen's reasoning to some extent. The coach didn't want him to copy Beckham's technique exactly. There was no such thing as a perfect technique in the whole world. He was advising Zachary to attempt to improve it. He could only make those modifications and advance his skill further before developing hard-to-break habits for the technique.

"It is good that you understand." The coach nodded. "As much as you admire all the stars in the world, you should try to develop your unique playing style."

"Aim to surpass the stars, but not imitate them. I would not say this to any other player."

"But, you aren't just any other player. You have got the talent to accomplish such a feat—that's if we train together for some time." The coach said before walking away.

"Was he just talking about freekicks all the time?" Kendrick ran up to him once the coach departed.

"Yes." Zachary nodded. "He was advising me to add more power to my set-pieces."

"Oh, my," Kendrick exclaimed, mopping a hand through his long brown hair. "Does he want to turn you into a Roberto Carlos?"

"Nope. I think he only wants me to improve my technique." Zachary sighed. "Coach Johansen is surprisingly somewhat caring in contrast to what many think of him."

Kendrick shook his head. "That's because you weren't here two years ago," he said quietly.

"Can we try a few more freekicks?" Zachary inquired, diverting the topic from Coach Johansen.

"Just four more since the others have started arriving," Kendrick replied, running back to his goal.

Zachary took a few more freekicks against Kendrick. He added more power to his shots, making them waver far beyond the goalposts. He realized that it would be much harder to modify the technique than he had imagined.

Beckham's freekick technique generated incredible power, unleashing shots with speeds over 80 miles per hour. Zachary was sure he could release curling freekicks exceeding 90 miles per hour if he mastered the Bend-it like Beckham Juju. However, Coach Johansen had advised him to add even more power to the shots, further raising their speed.

Did the coach intend for him to unleash shots traveling at 100 miles per hour? The idea was enticing to him. That would stretch physics to its limit. No goalkeeper would ever be fast enough to react to such ball velocity.

Very few individuals had managed to let loose such shots in recorded football history. Usually, it was by accident, not by design. Keepers would remain terrified of him as long as he could consistently smash the ball on target with that much power.

Zachary just needed to ask the coach for advice during their meeting later that day.

In-between his training with Kendrick, Zachary noticed that most of the players had turned their attention to the administrative building housing Coach Johansen's office. "Do you know what is happening?" He asked the Swedish goalkeeper.

"Nope." Kendrick shook his head, wiping his gloves off his sweat pants. "But I do have some guesses." He smiled wryly. "Let's ask Paul and Kasongo first. They should know more about what is going on.

They approached Kasongo and Paul and inquired about what was going on in Coach Johansen's office.

Paul sighed. "The coach has called two players into his office. Everyone suspects they'll be—cut from the team."

"Which ones?" Kendrick asked, frowning.

Paul's expression darkened with what looked more like sadness or maybe sympathy. "Ivan, one of the midfielders, and Mathew Stevenson, the other goalkeeper."

"Let's hope the coach is in a good mood and will not call anyone else aside from those two," Kendrick said. "It's good we still have a team of fourteen. Otherwise, we would miss out on the international tournaments once again this year."

Coach Johansen only cut two players from the program. They departed from the training grounds soon after.

Zachary empathized with them. His team in his previous life had released him and similarly terminated his contract. The experience was something he never wanted to go through again. It was simply hard to hear the news that a dream you had devoted over half your life to—would never be realized. The rejection had left a mark that sealed his fate as a failure in his previous life. That was the main reason he was putting a lot of effort into his career in this life despite having a system.

"Zachary!" Coach Bjørn Peters hollered out from near the administrative building.

"Here," Zachary yelled back, jogging towards the coach.

"You can meet the coach now," Coach Bjørn said before turning back and heading into the building.

Zachary took a deep breath and followed him through the glass doors. He wasn't the least bit worried he would be cut loose by the team. He was certain that he was the star player of the academy's under-17 team.

After the match the previous day, Coach Johansen had assured him they only needed to meet briefly to discuss his future. Zachary expected to hear about the plans the academy had for him.

## Chapter 42 - A Contract

Zachary followed Coach Bjørn through a narrow corridor, up the stairs, into Coach Johansen's office on the second floor.

"Have a seat," said Coach Johansen. He pointed to one of the elegant sofas opposite his desk.

"Thank you," Zachary replied as he sank into the sofa. Coach Bjørn was seated on a padded stool next to Coach Johansen's desk, maintaining his silence.

Zachary let his eyes take in his surroundings. The office, painted with a light shade of grey, had a single massive floor-to-ceiling window facing the training grounds. In one corner, an air conditioner blasted at low settings. It brought in the air from outside, giving off a fresh breeze. To its left stood a wooden cabinet with glass doors. Through the glass, Zachary could see several trophies lined up on its shelves.

"So, how are you finding life here in Norway," Coach Johansen inquired, half-smiling. He placed his hands on his grey desk. Beside him sat a desktop computer, an open notebook, and a stack of papers held down by a ball-shaped paperweight. At the far corner of the uncluttered desk stood a framed photograph of a red-haired teenage girl, probably the coach's daughter.

"I'm doing well," Zachary replied politely. "The training facilities here are quite remarkable. However, I haven't taken part in enough matches to practice my skills." He added, voice taking on a dubious tone.

Zachary needed more official matches to gain match experience—and, of course, system Juju-points. He had realized that he could earn 30 or more points from system missions in each game, depending on his performance.

He wanted to take part in more games to rack up points and purchase high-grade elixirs to improve his physical fitness.

Coach Johansen folded his arms across his chest, maintaining his half-smile. "That's one of the reasons I called you in here. I can promise that in a few months, you'll get a lot of match time. You'll get the chance to play against other academies from the rest of Europe."

"You mean the Riga Cup?"

"Yes." Coach Johansen nodded. "This time, I have struck a deal with the Rosenborg officials. You can join the squads heading for the Riga and SIA cups. But on one condition."

Zachary met the coach's gaze and spoke quietly. "And that is?" Explore new **novels** on [novelbin\(.\)com](http://novelbin(.)com)

Just then, the door opened behind him. Heavy footsteps moved into the room. "You started without me?" Murmured a deep voice, in a tone laced with a tinge of disapproval.

"Sorry, Mr. Malvik." Coach Johansen stood up and extended a hand to the new stranger. "But you are late. No worries, though. We were simply answering some of Zachary's questions while awaiting your arrival."

Zachary was confused. Was there supposed to be someone else present during the meeting? He turned to his side and observed the new arrival. He was a middle-aged blonde man in an elegant suit with the standard-issue Norwegian face, ubiquitous square shoulders, and a square chin. He looked like the stereotypical office type and seemed to have mastered his look of confidence as a money-making skill.

The stranger took Coach Johansen's hand and smiled. "Pardon me, coach. I came rushing here right out of court. How is your morning, by the way?" He asked, settling down on the sofa beside Zachary.

"Fine," Coach Johansen replied, sitting back down. "I guess you remember my assistant, Coach Bjørn?" He cocked his head to one side, observing the man.

"Yes, yes," the stranger said, turning towards the other coach in the room. "Good morning, to you?"

"Good morning." Coach Bjørn nodded at the stranger, smiling.

The two coaches were behaving in-a-way that reminded Zachary of locals back home greeting a delegate visiting their village. They were very polite and formal, which was out of character. Zachary concluded that the stranger must be someone in an important position.

"And this young one here is Zachary Bemba." Coach Johansen introduced him last. "He's the player we were talking about."

"Nice to meet you, young man," the stranger said, turning and extending his hand to Zachary. "I'm Daniel Malvik, one of the legal advisors of Rosenborg. I've heard a lot about you." He smiled kindly.

Zachary shook his hand. "Nice to meet you too." He turned towards Coach Johansen, his brows raised questioningly.

"No need to worry," Coach Johansen replied, waving his hand. "We are here to talk about some possibilities for your future. Let's wait for Mr. Stein before we continue our talk."

Zachary was surprised that even Mr. Stein was attending. He had initially thought he would only talk briefly with Coach Johansen before returning to his training. However, the importance of the meeting had exceeded his expectations.

They didn't have to wait long. Mr. Stein soon arrived—and the meeting began.

"Okay, gentlemen," Mr. Daniel Malvik said, after clearing his throat. "I don't like to beat about the bush. Let's get to business right away."

He turned towards Zachary. "Young man, I represent the club. I'm just here to seek a commitment from you and your representatives."

"What kind of commitment?" Zachary inquired, stealing a glance at Coach Johansen. He wondered whether the commitment was the condition he needed to fulfill before joining the academy teams heading to Riga and Valencia.

Mr. Malvik smiled. "To put it simply, we need to put you under contract," he said, pulling out a few papers from his briefcase.

"I'll speak bluntly," he continued. "You are an asset that the club is developing. That is, of course, as a talented football player. Correct?"

Zachary nodded. He could understand the lawyer's logic. Rosenberg was pumping money to maintain his stay in Trondheim and turning him into a professional soccer player.

"However, you are not under any contract. The moment you turn 18, any other club could come and snatch you away without paying any transfer fees. We don't want to see that happening. That's why we are offering you a contract at an earlier date."

"What about the FIFA regulations?" Zachary had nothing against signing a contract with Rosenberg. He wanted to play for the club that had brought him to Europe for a year or two. But, he had no intention of taking part in breaking any of the rules of FIFA.

Mr. Malvik smiled, nodding at the rest of the men in the office. "I'm glad your attitude isn't strongly opposed to signing for the club," he said. "You don't have to worry about the FIFA rules. We need you to sign something uncomplicated—to ensure that you are with us after leaving the academy next year. To make certain that FIFA doesn't catch on, you'll have to sign an NDA, of course." He explained.

"Just give me the contract and give me a moment to decide," Zachary interrupted. He didn't want to spend his whole day listening to the terms of the contract.

"Okay, here you go." Mr. Malvik handed him two sets of papers.

Zachary quickly started reading through. One set was a four-page contract committing Zachary to play for Rosenberg BK right after his eighteenth birthday. He would have to stay at the club for three years before moving on to greener pastures—that is, if he signed the document. The second was a Non-Disclosure Agreement. It committed Zachary to not divulging the contract terms to anyone else—aside from the people present in that room.

"I'll only sign if you reduce the duration I have to play for Rosenberg to two years," Zachary said, locking gazes with the lawyer.

"Done." The lawyer smiled, picking up another set of papers from his open briefcase. He then handed them to Zachary.



Zachary was perplexed as he received the papers. He wondered why the lawyer had been so quick to agree to his bargain.

[Did I miss anything in the contract?]

He read through the new contract, word by word. The others left him to his own devices and started conversing among themselves in Norwegian.

Zachary did not mind since he was already tired of being the center of attention in the room. He continued reading and quickly discovered that there wasn't any monetary remuneration from the Rosenborg team until he was 18 years. According to the terms, Zachary would only receive another contract at the end of the following year. That was before he joined the first-team roster.

After reading through, he weighed the pros and cons of the contract. If he didn't sign, the Rosenborg officials would remain wary of him. They wouldn't allow him to enter the international youth competitions like the Riga Cup. Zachary would then be hard-pressed to rack up any Juju points, thereby slowing down his progress.

However, if he did sign, he would only have to stay at Rosenborg for two years. After that, he would be free to go anywhere he wanted and play in the rest of Europe. But who knows? Maybe, he would perform well and garner the attention of the big clubs before then. Zachary wouldn't believe that Rosenborg would resist a transfer deal of more than 15 Million US Dollars. Their record transfer was less than 3 Million US Dollars at that moment.

"I will sign," he announced after deliberating.

The rest of the three men turned towards him, their eyebrows lifted in expressions of blank surprise. It seemed like they had not expected him to agree right away.

"Have you finished considering?" Mr. Malvik asked.

"Yes." Zachary nodded.

"Okay, then." The lawyer smiled.

#### Chapter 43 - New Training Plans

"Zachary," said Mr. Stein. "You should come and visit me a few times. It's been long since we last talked."

Zachary sighed. "My training schedule keeps me from doing anything else. I fear that if I break out of routine, I'll lose focus and disrupt my progress. That's why I didn't even go home last summer."

The two of them were standing just outside Coach Johansen's office. They had just finished attending the short meeting.

"I truly understand. The coaches only have good things to say about you. But, remember not to overtax your body." The scout warned. "By the way, have you thought about getting an agent?" He asked in an offhanded manner.

"Not yet." Zachary shook his head. "There is no need for me to get an agent when I haven't begun my pro career. I'll think about this next year."

"That's okay." Mr. Stein smiled. "But remember to consult with me when you do decide to get one. Do not get scammed by fake agencies when you go outside the country to play in tournaments. The situation in other European countries isn't the same as here in Norway."

"I'll keep that in mind." Zachary nodded.

"I'll be off now. I don't want to keep you from your training. Stay focused. The sky is your limit." Mr. Stein said before walking away.

Zachary sighed. He couldn't help but notice that Mr. Stein looked much older than before. His wrinkles had become more pronounced. He was even using a cane to support himself.

[I hope he is all right.] Zachary inwardly prayed. He turned around and headed back into Coach Johansen's office.

"Back already?" Coach Johansen said, looking up from his notebook.

"Yes, Coach," Zachary replied, settling himself in one of the sofas. The others had all left. Coach Johansen was the only one still present in the room.

"You wanted to see me?" Zachary inquired.

"Yes," the coach replied, half smiling. "I've watched your playing style evolving over the few matches you have played under me. I'm convinced that we can turn you into a highly agile player capable of beating any defender in the professional leagues. I thought up a good training plan that can further increase your speed."

Zachary was instantly at full attention. He had been searching for more effective ways to increase his speed.

"Do you wish to add a speed training routine to your schedule?" Coach Johansen inquired.

"Of course." Zachary nodded.

"Then take this," the coach said, tearing out a few pages from his notebook. "Go through the speed workout three times a week. You should start seeing results within two to three months." He handed the papers to Zachary.

"DING"

No sooner had Zachary received the pages—than the system notification sounded in his mind. The translucent interface materialized before him, indicating he had a new system mission awaiting completion. It seemed coaches could initiate system missions as long as they issued tasks to him. His mood lifted as soon as he realized he had another way to earn Jujū-points.

"If there is nothing else, you can return to training."

"Coach," Zachary said as he willed the system interface to close with his mind. He couldn't begin perusing through it in front of his coach. "I do have a few questions that have been on my mind."

"One question. It's almost time for tactical training."

"Do you know anything about the X-factor in football?"

"Oh." The Coach half-smiled. "The X-factor. Why in hell would you be researching that?" He looked at Zachary with a frown.

"I just want to know."

"Well, there is no harm in telling you," Coach Johansen said. "The answer is simple. The X-factor is just the ability to win matches for the team. On my side, I consider things like creativity, consistency, and even sometimes the luck of a player as the X-factor the team needs."

Zachary frowned. "Does that mean the most skilled player will always have the highest X-factor?" He asked to clear his confusion. He was very consistent in all his matches. However, the system was still indicating no available data for the X-factor stat.

"That's is usually the case," Coach Johansen replied. "But not always. Some players are not that skilled on the ball but often win matches for their team. They always find themselves in strategic positions, either by design or by accident, and end up scoring match winners. They get those simple moments of individual brilliance—and—pa—they have won you the game." He clapped his hands to emphasize his point.

"Let me give you an example," the coach continued. "Do you remember the Manchester United squad with both Ryan Giggs and Ruud van Nistelrooy?"

Zachary nodded.

"Giggs was very skilled with the ball and a good finisher. His playing style excited many. However, he didn't score often enough to impact some of the seasons. However, Nistelrooy would get few passes

inside the box and put the ball into the net. He was the tops-scorer for several seasons at Old Trafford. I believe he had a higher X-factor on the team compared to Giggs, who was a more skilled ball handler."

The coach smiled softly at Zachary. "To have a high X-factor, you need to perform, score, and win games. Not just once. You have to remain consistent over many matches." He spoke in a conclusive tone.

Zachary's confusion was growing. He'd also figured out that much about the X-factor from the literature online. He had had a significant impact on the outcome of all his games since traveling back in time. He was still perplexed that the system rated his X-factor stat at Grade F. He wondered whether that was due to a lack of enough data from the right number of games.

"You should return to your training now," Coach Johansen said, his tone returning to his default somberness.

"Coach, wait," Zachary intoned with a sense of pleading. "How can I increase the power behind my freekicks? You said something about helping me improve in the morning."

Coach Johansen lifted his reddish-brown eyebrows. "The key to improving the power lies in the back-swing speed of your shooting-leg."

"Remember, the kick speed comes from the rotation of the hips and not from the legs. I would advise you to start by making sure your hip rotation muscles are strong and flexible." He explained.

"I've included some exercises in your speed workout that will help increase the back-swing speed of your kick. Just remember, your leg acts as a bow whenever you take a shot. You'll be able to unleash a powerful and swift arrow only if you have a very strong but elastic bowstring—that can snap back instantly. On the other hand, if you have a rigid bowstring, your shots will be nothing much. Are we clear?"

"Yes, coach." Zachary nodded, finally getting a grasp on how to improve his shooting. He would create more spin and increase the ball's velocity by increasing his kicking speed.

Zachary didn't need to make any significant modifications to the Bend-it like Beckham Juju at all. All he needed was more flexibility and strength in his hips.

"Okay, back to your training."

"Thanks a lot for your guidance, coach," Zachary replied politely. Coach Johansen's pointer had come at the right time. He would have spent months figuring out which aspects of the technique he needed to improve.

He was eager to try out the new technique within the system simulator. Then, he would be ready to attempt it in the real world.

#### Chapter 44 - A Break

Right after leaving Coach Johansen's office, Zachary looked for a secluded spot beside the administrative building. He opened the system interface after surveying his surroundings. He had confirmed that there wasn't a soul close by since all the players were on the pitch going through various drills. The dropping of two players from the team that morning seemed to have motivated all his teammates beyond measure.

"DING"

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#### G.O.A.T MISSIONS

#NEW MISSION: five-months Speed Workout from your Coach.

\*Task 1: Complete two sets of the following speed drills, three times a week, over a distance of 50 meters. High-Knees, Butt-Kicks, B-Skips, Bounds, Single-Leg Diagonal-Bounds, In-and-Out Leg-exercise (Click [here](#) to watch instructional videos).

\*Task 2: Complete twenty sets of sprints, over a distance of 20 meters, three times a week.

\*Task 3: Complete ten sets of Resistance-Band sprinting, over a distance of 20 meters, three times a week.

\*Task 4: Complete four rounds of half a dozen Hatha-Yoga poses, daily, for a week (Click here to watch instructional video).

\*Task 5: Complete four rounds of half a dozen Hip-Flexor exercises, daily, for a week (Click here to watch instructional video).

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\*Rewards:

->600 Juju-points

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\*Punishment in case the mission is still incomplete after the stipulated time.

->1200 Juju-points subtracted from the user.

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\*Remarks: When you live for a dream, hard work is not an option. It's a necessity.

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Zachary noticed that the system mission was an exact copy of the training plan designed for him by Coach Johansen. He could now confirm that the coaches could initiate system missions if they gave him a task. It was like fishing for a quest from an NPC in a video game.

However, he felt overwhelmed after glancing through the exercises. By his estimation, he would need a minimum of two hours to complete the workout each day. He was going to be busier than usual over the following few months.

He didn't need to watch the instructional videos for most of the drills aside from Hip-Flexor exercises. He clicked on the video to understand the routine. A black silhouette appeared on the translucent system interface going through various poses of stretching his legs.

To Zachary, it was almost like watching a yoga video. The human shadow, on-screen, stretched its legs into different angles, some excessively obtuse. He felt relaxed after watching the video since there was no exercise in the routine he couldn't do at that moment.

He only needed to re-adjust his schedule to fit Coach Johansen's training plan. With the physical-conditioning-elixir from the system shop, he was confident he would complete the mission and earn the six hundred Juju-points.

"Zachary! What are you doing?" A voice interrupted his musings. He willed the system screen to close and glanced sideways. Paul Otterson stood to his left, his blue training jersey caked with sweat. "We're almost starting the tactical training sessions. Won't you be attending?" The Swede asked, wiping his sweaty forehead with the back of his sleeve.

Zachary flashed him a soft smile. "I was perusing through the training plan Coach Johansen designed for me. But, I can now join you for training."

"The coach designed a personalized training plan for you?" Paul exclaimed, resting his hand on Zachary's shoulder. "Lucky you. What is the training plan for?"

Zachary explained the goals of the new training routine to his flatmate as they walked to join the others for tactical training sessions.

A few minutes later, the team performed passing, shooting, and tackling drills—under the watchful eyes of the coaches. The intent was for the academy players to improve their overall gameplay. The coaches tried to recreate the most effective key passes in a defensive game. Passes were directed back into the 18 repetitively with increasing pace.



There were a dozen more coaches in the academy who helped the different players with personalized training. But, most solely instructed the students younger than 15. Johansen, Bjorn, and another goalkeeping coach were in charge of training Zachary and his under-17 teammates.

In the evening, Coach Johansen took them through a theoretical tactical session, analyzing recent matches played in the top European leagues. They reviewed videos of Barcelona, the unbeaten Arsenal, and AC Milan playing against various teams.

The Coach expounded on the techniques, formations, and remarkable performances in the games. He went on and on, highlighting the playing styles that Zachary and his teammates could learn. By the time he completed his lecture, it was already 6 p.m.

Zachary was feeling too worn out to go through with his new speed workout routine after the hectic training that day. He headed back to his apartment with his flatmates and watched a Manchester United game. After that, he ate a light dinner and headed back to his room for the night.

After locking the door and drawing the blinds, he summoned the system interface and selected the G.O.A.T-Skills-Simulator. Training in the simulator had turned into a pre-sleep habit the previous few weeks.

The system's virtual program allowed him to train in two modes. He could learn skills under the guidance of 3D models of great players like Beckham, or he could select an option to train by himself. Zachary chose the self-training mode since he intended to attempt modifying the Bend-it like Beckham Juju.

Over the next hour, he tried his best to improve his kick-swing speed in the simulator. He deviated slightly from Beckham's shooting posture to add more power to his curling freekicks. The process was not as troublesome as he had first imagined.

He didn't manage to hit the target that night. However, his shots grew more powerful and curved closer to the goalpost after each attempt. He felt his technique improving over the hour spent in the simulator.

However, he didn't end his training after the hour elapsed. He loaded the training packages for the Bend-it like Beckham Juju and resumed practice in the simulator. Although he intended to modify Beckham's technique, he needed a starting point. Completely mastering Beckham's setpiece-skill in the

virtual world was a good start. The knowledge would be a guiding lantern to usher him through the darkness. He spent two more hours practicing setpieces before sinking back into his sheets to sleep.

Weeks flashed by in a blur and the days became colder and shorter. Before Zachary knew it, September had arrived. His training had kept him busy and made the passage of time barely noticeable.

He had spent the preceding weeks sticking to a practice routine. He'd managed to incorporate the speed workout routine into his schedule three days each week. He went through every drill assigned to him by Coach Johansen without missing a single day. Step by step, he was on his way to completing the system mission.

However, his school tasks became more demanding as the school term progressed. The upper secondary school lecturers assigned him a greater number of assignments since he was in his final year.

Zachary would have been hard-pressed to cope if not for group discussions with Marta Romano, his classmate. After months of mingling, Zachary had developed a solid friendship with the Italian girl. She didn't make him feel uncomfortable like the rest of the European girls. She'd helped him with several assignments. His grades remained above average due to her tutoring efforts.

He did not hope for anything more than friendship in their interactions. At that moment, his sole focus was soccer. He didn't want any distractions. However, she kept pestering him to fulfill his promise (which he would rather forget) before every group discussion. It felt like he owed her money rather than a date.

He finally gave in and took her out for a movie at the beginning of the autumn break. Together, they watched Captain America—The First Avenger, showing that Saturday via Prinsen Kinosenter.

Zachary had a good time. He felt his fatigue melt away after taking some time off from his training routine to have fun.

It was the first time he had taken time out of his routine for anything other than soccer or academics since his arrival in Norway. He made a mental note to fit more relaxation time into his weekly schedule after the experience.

When they finished watching the movie, they rode a bus to City Syd and had dinner together at a small restaurant there. Zachary was surprised by how expensive the food was. A simple spiced pizza in the restaurant cost 550 Norwegian Kroner, yet he could purchase it in the supermarket for just 20. Other main course dishes were in the range of 800 - 1000 Kroner.

"Would you like me to select the dishes?" Marta asked after noticing Zachary's hesitation. Her Italian accent weighed heavily on her words. She was seated opposite Zachary in the uncrowded restaurant.

"I'm hesitating because everything here costs a fortune," Zachary replied honestly.

There was no use in putting on airs, pretending he could afford such expense while he was still saving up half his allowance to help his grandmother settle in Lubumbashi. "Let's just eat pizza," he suggested.

Marta flashed him a radiant smile. "Pizza is fine with me. You forget I'm Italian." Her presence was so magnetic and sensual that it distracted him for a moment. However, after remembering the system mission, he reigned in his urges. He needed to remain focused until he graduated from the academy.

After the meal, they talked for an hour about happier things: food, gossip, academics, and goals. Zachary had a relaxing evening that day.

#### Chapter 45 - Friendly Matches

"To prepare for the Riga Cup, we'll be playing a few friendly matches against some third division teams," Coach Johansen announced. He let his gaze roam across the academy players seated in a semicircle around him. Zachary and his teammates had just finished their training at the academy grounds that Friday evening.

"Our goal is to compete in four matches before the harsh winter sets in," the coach continued. "I expect you to put more effort into your preparations over the next few months. Our goal is to win every single game, starting with By sen Top football next Friday. Be ready..."

At the start of October, Zachary and his academy teammates faced the By?sen Toppfotball Club in a closely contested game at the NF grounds. The club played in the 3rd Division of the Norwegian Football League. They had several experienced players, especially in their defense, who caused the academy team a lot of trouble.

The game remained at a stalemate until the 88th minute. With a spark of individual brilliance, Zachary released ?rjan B?rmark with a teasing through-pass, from close to the center-circle, during a counter-attack.

The NF academy's lone striker dashed past the defenders and latched on to the inch-perfect pass behind the defenders. He proceeded to fire the ball past By?sen's hapless goalkeeper, sealing a sweet 1:0 victory for the academy.

However, Zachary wasn't in the best of moods even after the win. He felt empty after failing to score against the third division team. That was the first time he had been unable to add his name to the score sheet in a game since his arrival in Norway.

Zachary's mind could no longer find satisfaction in simply playing the game. He felt a burning urge to score goals. So, he worked harder, aiming to better his performance in the next friendly match.

The outdoor and gym workouts got him the fresh air he needed to put the match behind him. He could feel his lungs expand, his heartbeat stronger with each session. In those moments of pushing past his limits, he sharpened his focus and readied himself for the next match.

A month later, the NF academy faced-off against the NTNUI university sports club. Zachary worked hard for all 90 minutes, playing like he was in the Euro Champions League.

Right after kickoff, he conquered the midfield. He tackled opposing midfielders, intercepted passes in the center of the pitch, and above all, let-loose several passes into the wings that caught the NTNUI's defenders several times off-guard.

In the 23rd minute, Zachary unleashed a defense-splitting pass towards the right-wing, catching the opposing defenders and midfielders—off-guard. The NTNUI players couldn't react to the threat in-time since they'd been attacking the NF academy's box during a corner kick.

Kasongo collected the pass in the right-wing and took off like the wind towards NTNUI's 18-yard box. No players stood between him and the goal except the goalkeeper. His pace was swift. He'd gotten faster after following a training plan designed specifically for him by Coach Johansen.

Zachary watched Kasongo expertly loop the ball over the outstretched hands of the goalkeeper. 1:0 in favor of the academy. He was glad to see his friend score for the first time since arriving in Trondheim. He hoped the goal would bolster Kasongo's confidence and encourage him to work harder.

That strike opened the floodgates. Zachary and his teammates played with newfound vigor, dictating play against the university team. Whenever they lost possession, they used high-pressing tactics to win the ball back quickly.

The academy players defended high up the field, pushed play wide, and prevented any NTNUI possession in the midfield. Zachary forced several turnovers and would quickly move towards the opposition's box whenever he won the ball. His first touches were perfect, and his passes like sniper bullets, always finding their targets. His transitions were swift and fierce; he played the link between defense and striking with perfection.

Zachary scored twice and provided two assists that resulted in goals that day. In the 30th minute, he dribbled past four defenders using one of his signature-runs, finding his way into the box. Zachary then smashed a right-footed shot into the top right corner, making it 2:0 in favor of the academy.

Zachary's second goal was an exact copy of the first, the only exception being; he cut into the box from the wings. He looked unstoppable as he bolted and weaved through the gaps in-between the defenders like a sewing machine's needle through the seams of a cloth. He blasted the ball into the back of the net in the 55th minute, making the score 3:0.

As the match progressed, the NF academy sustained its dominance in all aspects of gameplay. The boys in the dark blue jerseys were on fire. They were on a rampage around the pitch. Zachary zig-zagged through the defense two more times, releasing ?rjan B?rmark and Paul Otterson—who scored in the 60th and 72nd minutes of the game.

But that was not the end of the action that Friday evening. The academy team was not going to go easy on their opponents. Not with Coach Johansen on the sidelines.

In the 88th minute, Magnus Blakstad, the tall defending central midfielder, timed his run perfectly to connect with a corner kick. He then planted a close-range header close to the left post, making the score 6:0.

The NF academy's game would have been perfect that day if they hadn't conceded in additional time. In the 92nd minute, poor marking within the box allowed one of NTNUI's players to latch on to one of their rare crosses into the academy's box. The NTNUI's number nine powered a header into the top right corner, leaving Kendrick Otterson beaten. The match ended with a score of 6:1 in favor of Zachary and his teammates.

But Coach Johansen was anything but happy. "I already said again and again that you must maintain a high state of concentration until the final whistle," he said, rubbing his bald head in frustration. The players had just concluded the game. They were seated on the sidelines, listening to the post-match analysis by their coach. Some chugged down water, others fanned themselves with their shirts, while others munched on snacks to restore the calories they had burnt up during the match.

"You can't afford to make any careless mistakes, especially when you face some of the top talents in Europe in just a few months." The coach let his fiery gaze rest on Robin Jatta and Lars Togstad, the starting wing-backs. "How could you concede a goal like that in the final minutes?" He scowled at the two players.

All the players remained quiet, waiting for their coach to continue. They had long grown immune to his antics. If one among their ranks blasted a hole in the moon with the sheer power of his shots, Coach Johansen would proceed to ask why their technique couldn't take care of the sun, too.

They had won a game by a margin of five goals, but the 'red beard' was still nitpicking on a single mistake. The players only listened to the critique halfheartedly. Some kept glancing at their phones, seemingly counting down the minutes. They were all eager to be dismissed.

Coach Johansen seemed to read their minds and frowned. "You shouldn't be satisfied with winning against part-time professional players in a 3rd Division team," he said, shaking his head. "When you join the Riga Cup next February, you'll face off against some of the most clinical forwards in your age group. They'll be able to exploit all your mistakes and use them against you."

"I can point out several such mistakes in the match we just played," the coach paused as if to let the information sink into the heads of the players. "Robin, you allowed their striker to make runs behind you thrice in the game. If he'd been a little bit faster, he would have punished us for such carelessness.

Magnus, you let several of their players beat you to several high balls in the center of the field. Just imagine if there was a midfielder as good as Zach on the opposing side. We would have conceded more than two goals..."

The coach continued pointing out the mistakes of all players on the team. He nitpicked on every miskick and every mismatch in positioning during the game. He highlighted match situations that could have resulted in goals if the opponents had been more skilled and clinical. By the time he finished his little oration, no one was still jubilant over having won the friendly game.

"We need to focus during the next few months," the coach said, his voice taking on a soft tone. "We shall drill into you as much tactical awareness as we can before the games in Riga. That, I can promise."

"However, you need to do your part, especially in the remaining two friendlies against Gj?vik and Sprint-Jel?y next month. Train like professionals over the next few weeks so that you can perform beyond expectations in those two games. You are—dismissed for today."

Coach Johansen remained true to his words. Over the remaining three weeks of November, he worked the players like oxen on the pitch. He increased their tactical passing and defensive strategy sessions by several hours each day. Most of them silently accepted the training without any complaints. They were eager to improve themselves, and above all, feared facing his wrath if they failed to live up to his expectations.

The seriousness of the players carried on into the matches. They managed to win by 3:0 against Gj?vik FC at the start of December. A week later, they thrashed Sprint-Jel?y 2:0, ending their friendly games before the Christmas break with perfection. They'd managed to hold their own against third division teams without conceding a single goal for two games.

Zachary maintained his perfect form and scored a goal in each of the two matches. His speed was already a nightmare for the third division teams. He was the outlier that pushed the academy team to perform beyond their level against the third division teams. His perfect control in the midfield kept the opponents at bay, denying them any chances to create opportunities to threaten the NF goal.

#### Chapter 46 - Solo Winter Training

The cold winter months soon arrived as nature's orchestra came to a sudden standstill. Most of the residents of the Moholt Student village slowly left for holidays. The few that stayed were all from outside Europe.

"Are you sure you want to remain here alone?" Kasongo inquired, frowning. "The Coach has granted us a one-month holiday. You should also get some rest. Why not join me on vacation? You don't have to spend the whole week there—but just two weeks of the holiday."

"Kasongo," Zachary intoned solemnly. "I've already made up my mind. I'm not going back home or on any vacations until I make it to pro-level."

He had no intention of changing his environment while amid training plans and an essential system mission. Taking a break at that moment would make him lax and lessen his focus on his goals.

On the other hand, if he stayed in Trondheim, he would be free to train all day without any interruptions. He would improve his stats much further before the rest returned from their holidays. A one-month training plan could do his physique wonders, with some help from the system. Zachary wasn't willing to give that up for anything.

"Alright, suit yourself," Kasongo mumbled, pulling his suitcase out of the door. He was on his way to meet his family on vacation in Paris. "I wish you a Merry Christmas. Hopefully, you'll have a memorable one here alone in an empty apartment." He added, wryly with sarcasm.

"Merry Christmas to you too," Zachary replied, flashing his flatmate a smile. He didn't mind his friend's tone since he had rejected his invitations several times. Being turned down multiple times would sour the mood of anyone. "Remember to buy some good quality Adidas soccer boots for me when you get to Paris," he added in a joking manner.

After Kasongo left, Zachary was left alone in the Moholt student village apartment. His Swedish flatmates had already left the previous day. He felt lonely in the desolate apartment for a moment, though the feeling did not last.

Looking at the snow outside his window raised his spirits. The corner of his mouth curved into a soft smile. "Just one more year—and all this training will be worth it," he mumbled to himself in encouragement. "Time to begin training."

Zachary settled into a calm state, one that seemed to have taken inspiration from the frozen earth outside his window. Without an ounce of hesitation, he dived into an intensive training routine that helped him forget it was the Christmas holidays.



Due to the knee-deep snow all over the city, Zachary moved all his training programs indoors. He spent most of his time either in the gym or the indoor futsal pitch, going through a speedwork routine and improving his shot accuracy.

He'd even started soaking in a cold tub of water every evening for fifteen minutes to recover faster and free more time for exercise. He would soothe his sore muscles and reduce his perception of fatigue whenever he immersed his body in the water at 4 to 6 degrees Celsius. The ice-cold water would freshen up his body and ensure it was in shape for the set of yoga and Hip-Flexor exercises he performed at night.

Zachary was not worried about squeezing himself dry since he possessed the physical-conditioning-elixir from the system shop. By consuming a single dose, he gained enough energy to train for a week without harming his body.

The winter gloom did not dampen his enthusiasm because he was progressing and improving in many areas. His movements were faster and sharper than they had been the previous month. His endurance was also getting better. He couldn't wait for the Riga Cup to commence. He was itching to test his skills against teams of international academy students from all over Europe.

Zachary sprinted, jogged, lifted weights, and conducted agility and endurance enhancing drills indoors. He didn't neglect to juggle the ball for about an hour or two each day to maintain his deft ball control. Holidays like the Christmas break often made players rusty. Zachary wanted to avoid losing his touch and going off form. The ball was his best friend, his route to fame and riches. He had to spend time caressing it, bonding with it as much as possible.

Since all his friends had left, he trained on his own using a wall. He would mark out a point on the wall and shoot at it from different angles while adjusting his leg power.

The wall soon became his perfect training partner. It would play with him whenever he wanted, and he could play with it for hours, yet it was never tired. Sometimes he would kick the ball at the wall until late in the night, varying his kick-swing speed and practicing the Bend-it like Beckham Juju skill.

His skills improved at a steady pace since the wall was the perfect partner. It never made a mistake. If he gave it a perfect pass, he would get a perfect ball back. His practice was a hundred times more efficient while training with the wall indoors. He didn't need to keep running and collecting the ball in-between

his shooting, as he usually did in real pitches. Due to his increased efficiency, he would usually shoot 100 times more than he would have on the field.

By mid-January, he could easily play 400 non-stop aerial rounds of one-twos with the wall. It was as if he was playing tennis with the wall, albeit with his soccer boots. Throughout the offseason, he managed to improve his already phenomenal ball-handling even further.

Zachary had progressed in various aspects of the game by the end of the one-month vacation. He barely felt the passage of time while occupied by his busy training schedule. He even managed to complete the system speed workout mission and earned a sizeable sum of Juju-points as a reward.

He had been awarded 600 Juju-points for completing the speed workout routine along with an additional 200 points as a bonus. He felt like a rich man sitting on a mountain of Juju-points. He possessed a total stock of 1067 points after the mission completion—due to his previous earnings of 350 Juju-points in the friendlies before the Christmas Break.

With such a large sum of Juju-points, Zachary had the option to upgrade the system. However, he settled for a better course of action to meet his immediate goals.

He bought a D-grade agility-enhancing-elixir from the system shop for 1000 Juju-points. He was still in a good mood despite almost spending his entire stockpile. The remaining 67 Juju-points were enough for activating the system simulator until the opening ceremony of the Riga Cup, two weeks later. Th.ê most

The D-grade elixir was in the shape of a small onion, just like the C-grade version he had consumed when he initially advanced his agility. Zachary swallowed it down immediately after taking it out of the system inventory.

An intense wave of hunger washed over him once it had dissolved into his system. However, he had made ample preparations this time around by preparing a kilogram of yummy oven-baked chicken thighs—and a few other side dishes to feast on after consuming the elixir.

Zachary got to eating right away since the hunger was becoming more unbearable by the second. As he enjoyed his meal, alone in his apartment, he opened the system interface. He wanted to check out the status of his physical stats after taking the elixir.

He had resisted the urge to check on his improvement for the entirety of the Christmas break.

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\*USER STATS

->Physical Fitness: A+

->Soccer Technique: A+

->Game Intelligence: A+

->Mental Ability and Mindset: B-

->X-Factors: F

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

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\*USER STATS

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

Balance and Coordination: A+

Agility: A+

Strength: A-

Stamina: A+

Endurance Points: 7400/9500 (A+)

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"What the f\*\*k?" Zachary could not help but swear out loud after perusing through his physical stats data. "What is happening?" He rubbed at his Afro-styled hair like it was a bother to him, his voice laced with a tinge of frustration.

All his physical stats had been improving steadily due to his intense fitness training routines. His strength, stamina, and endurance stats had all increased by a single grade over the past five months.

However, his agility stat was still at the A+ grading even after the consumption of an elixir.

He was sure it had worked since he could still feel waves of hunger washing through his body. And, he had been getting faster after exercising with Coach Johansen's routine for the past few months. But the system still rated him below S grade in the agility department. Zachary was perplexed. He pondered whether he needed to consume an A-grade elixir to push his stats up to the S-grading.

The only way to confirm just how much his top sprinting speed had improved was to use the electric timers. However, that would have to wait—until the coaches returned from their holidays a few days later.

Chapter 47 - To Riga, Latvia

Saturday, February 11, 2012.

Zachary, his teammates, and the academy coaches rose early before 5:00 A.M that morning. They boarded a Scandinavian Airlines flight from Trondheim-Vaernes Airport via Oslo and headed to Riga, Latvia. They were on their way to participate in the Riga Winter Cup, set to begin the following day.

"Captain," Paul Otterson intoned, turning back to face Zachary. The Swede had chosen a window seat positioned in the row just in front of Zachary. "Do you know which big teams will be participating?" He queried.

"I already told you not to keep calling me captain." Zachary scowled at his flatmate. "Just use my real name," he said, smiling wryly.

Coach Johansen had named him the NF academy captain for the duration of the tournament in Riga. Paul and Kasongo had changed how they addressed him to captain right away, irritating him to no end.

"Well, you better get used to it. Coz you're captain from now on." Paul smiled. "Do you know which big teams will be participating? Did the coach reveal anything about the fixtures?" He asked once again.

Zachary shook his head. "He said that all the fixtures and participating teams would be revealed during the pre-tournament meeting today evening. But, I heard him say something about VfB Stuttgart, Zenit, Tottenham, and the Genoa academies."

"Those are some good teams," Kasongo chipped in. He was seated beside Zachary. "I hope we get an easy group. I don't want us to meet tough opponents in the group stages." He added.

"Don't jinx us," Paul said, voice taking on a dramatic tone. "Saying it out loud could cause us to get dropped into the group of death."

Similar chatter went on all over the economy section of the small plane. The players displayed their eagerness to perform in the upcoming tournament. The journey passed quickly, and the airplane landed at Riga Airport at around half past eleven that morning.

A trolleybus, arranged by the Riga Cup organizers picked up Zachary and his teammates from the airport. They rode the bus through the urban landscape on their way to their hotel in the city center.

Zachary was surprised to see plenty of snow clothed trees rising like white fairytale beings in the wintry environs along the airport highway. He'd expected to see lots of tall buildings lining the streets of Riga. However, the bus ride went-on for more than fifteen minutes before they encountered high

architectural structures packed in exact grid patterns along the streets. Had it not been winter, Zachary was sure he would have seen lots of green spaces.

A few minutes later, the bus pulled up in the parking space of a majestic hotel, approximately five stories high, by Zachary's estimation. It was called—The Monika Centrum Hotel. Their guide enthusiastically informed them that it was one of the most luxurious in the whole of Riga.

"I didn't expect Riga to be this cold," Kasongo complained as they exited the bus. The fifteen players crowded around the bus and waited for follow-up instructions from their coaches. "I wonder how we'll play with all this snow around! Will they keep clearing it out of the fields during matches?" He added, folding his heavy jacket tighter around himself.

"Indoor stadiums, man," Paul replied, smiling. "There should be plenty of them around this city. I know for a fact there's a big indoor stadium in the Skonto Arena that hosts many games during winter."

"Have you been here before?" Zachary inquired, surprised by his flatmate's intimate knowledge of Riga. Meanwhile, he tightened his blue scarf around his neck to protect himself from the skin-numbing coldness.

Paul smiled wryly—while Kendrick, a few paces away, shook his head and pretended to observe the snow-filled scenery with a newfound eagerness.

"Well, what's wrong?" Kasongo inquired. "Have you been to Riga before or not?" He eyed the guy with whom he shared a first name suspiciously.

"I don't mind telling you about our previous experience here in Riga," Paul intoned, shaking his head. "We were part of the academy team that joined the Riga Cup three years ago as under-14s. But we lost all our games by a margin of 3 or more goals. At the end of the group stage, we had zero points and a goal difference of minus-15. The academy players who were present at that time prefer not to talk about the experience."

"A goal difference of negative 15 goals in just three games!" Kasongo mumbled without concealing the surprise in his voice. Zachary, too, was perplexed but remained silent. Such a goal difference meant the under-14 team conceded at least six goals in some games.

"Don't give me that look." Paul scowled at Kasongo. "Matches here are very competitive and played consecutively without rest in less than ten days. The giant academies have big teams and can switch squads for every match. Our team only had sixteen players at that time. We couldn't match the other teams."

"But still 15 goals..." Kasongo shook his head and let his voice trail off.

"So, let me get this straight," Zachary chipped in. "There are also other age categories in the tournament here?" He hadn't managed to pry much information from Coach Johansen before their departure. He was still unsure about the whole set-up of the Riga Tournament.

"There is our group which falls into the under-18 category," Paul replied. "If I remember correctly, there is also a competition for under-12s and then under-14s. But, the matches of the under-18s are the major attractions. They involve players that are close to going pro. So, expect a lot of fans, especially during the matches with Latvian teams."

They continued discussing the tournament until Coach Johansen returned. He immediately instructed them to settle in their rooms after handing them electronic keys. The event organizers had allocated double rooms to all fifteen players and staff of the NF academy. Zachary was glad he would be sharing a room with Kasongo after the allocation.

Their room was huge and contained luxuries like a thirty-six-inch TV with video and DVD and two sprawling leather sofas. At its center were two king-sized beds, adorned with pure white cotton sheets that could tempt any soul to sleep during the day. The heating system inside allowed fine control of the temperature, keeping the winter cold at bay. One side of the room was dominated by a floor to ceiling window with a clear view of the streets below.

"They certainly got us a good hotel," Kasongo commented after taking a look.

Zachary nodded in agreement. He was also satisfied with the accommodations. He could only sustain his peak state by getting enough rest in a comfortable environment.

"I'll first sleep for a while," he informed Kasongo while unpacking his luggage. "I slept quite late last night because of the preparations for today's journey." What he didn't add was the fact that he'd been practicing the Bend-it like Beckham Juju in the simulator until way past midnight.

"As captain, aren't you required to attend the pre-tournament meeting?" Kasongo asked, eyeing Zachary with a frown.

"The Coach informed me the meeting is at three in the afternoon. Just wake me up when you're heading out for lunch. That will give me enough time to prepare for the meeting.

#### Chapter 48 - Tournament Fixtures

That afternoon, Zachary followed his three coaches to the hotel's conference hall to attend the pre-tournament meeting. He looked smart in his dark blue tracksuit with the labels of the NF academy. His height and the brown color of his skin made him stand out amongst the team representatives and other young captains attending the meeting.

He'd grown taller than all his coaches during his time in Trondheim. He would have undoubtedly been the tallest player on the academy team had it not been for Magnus, his counterpart in the midfield. He received a few curious glances from the rest of the delegates as he took his seat in the conference room.

Zachary ignored them and surveyed the conference hall after settling in his seat next to Coach Bjørn Peters. To his surprise, he didn't recognize anyone. There were no famous names from his past life present in that room. He was once again made aware of just how few players from the youth leagues would go-on to join the ranks of the best soccer players in the world. He hardened his resolve to work hard and go pro as quickly as possible. Only then would he face off against world-class players on a regular basis and improve himself.

"Welcome to yet another Riga Winter Cup, ladies—and gentlemen," said a red-haired man in a dark suit. He was standing on the arranged podium, addressing the team delegates packed in the conference room. "This is a tournament that will be full of fresh emotions, as always." He smiled and adjusted his microphone to match his height.

"For those of you that don't know my name yet, I'm Raimonds Laizāns, the president of the Riga Cup. We welcome all sixteen teams participating in the tournament..." His accent, similar to that of Russian characters in movies, weighed heavily on his words. He informed the team delegates, including the team captains, about the general rules to be followed.

The Riga Cup matches would follow all applicable parts of the Latvian Football Federation rules. Teams would play in the group stages first and advance to the knockouts only if they made 1st or 2nd in their



groups. There would be no draws in the semifinals and finals. Penalties would determine the winners of the knockout matches if such a situation occurred.

Zachary settled in his seat and listened with nonchalance to the thirty-minute speech. He only rose to attention when the president mentioned something about a lottery, previously conducted, to organize the participating teams into groups.

"The organizing committee has already conducted lottery draws and arranged the sixteen participating teams into four groups," said Raimonds Laizāns, his mouth curving into a smile. "I want to assure you that the process was randomized and supervised by credible referees licensed by UEFA. The committee organized the groups in advance for better scheduling and to save time during the tournament. After this meeting, you can pick the tournament program from the officials by the door."

The president continued his oration and even introduced the sixteen teams participating in the tournament. Among the teams participating, Zachary noted some familiar names like Atalanta BC, Tottenham, FC Zenit Saint Petersburg, Genoa, AIK Stockholm, and VfB Stuttgart.

After the one and a half-hour meeting, Zachary excused himself and headed back to his room. He didn't wait for his coaches since they were still mingling with the delegates from the other academies.

On the way back, he did not forget to pick the match fixtures from one of the tournament officials by the conference room's door. That had been the main reason behind his attendance at the pre-tournament meeting.

"You're back," Kasongo intoned, jumping out from a sofa when he opened his hotel room door. Zachary noticed that both Paul and Kendrick, his Swedish flatmates, were also present. "Did you get the fixtures?" Kasongo and Paul asked more or less in unison.

Zachary flashed his teammates a soft smile. "What do you think?" He waved a brown A4 envelope in front of his flatmates.

"Great." Paul grinned. "Hurry. Let's check out the teams we'll be facing." He held out his arm towards Zachary.

"Give me a moment to open the envelope." Zachary hadn't perused through the fixtures before arriving in his room. He settled on his bed before tearing open the envelope and withdrawing a set of printed papers from it. There was a detailed list of the tournament groups and a few matches on the second page.

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#### The Riga Cup Tournament Groups (Under-18)

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##### Group A

(1) JFC Riga (Latvia)

(2) Genoa FC Youth (Italy)

(3) NF International (Norway)

(4) BK Frem (Denmark)

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##### Group B

(1) Zenit сшop (Russia)

(2) Tottenham (England)

(3) Atalanta (Italy)

(4) AIK Stockholm (Sweden)

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#### Group C

(1) Viimsi MRJK (Estonia)

(2) Skonto Academy (Latvia)

(3) VfB Stuttgart (Germany)

(4) FC Olimpiki Tbilisi (Georgia)

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#### Group D

(1) ADO Den Haag (Netherlands)

(2) HJK Helsinki (Finland)

(3) SK Sturm Graz (Austria)

(4) Jagiellonia (Poland)

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"Group B seems like the group of death," Paul commented as Zachary looked through the contents of the second page. At one point, his three flatmates had crowded over his shoulders—to glance at the fixtures in his hands.

"Zenit, Tottenham, and Atalanta." Kasongo whistled, shaking his head. "That surely is the group of death. Let them exhaust themselves in the group stages. We'll find it easier to win during the knockouts." Kasongo grinned.

"Our group is not an easy one as well," Kendrick chipped in. "We have to face Riga, a local club, as well as the Genoa academy from Italy."

Zachary ignored the chattering of his teammates and turned to the next page. Inscribed were the match fixtures and their scheduled times.

"So, we face JFC Riga on Monday at 8:00 A.M.," Kasongo observed. "Isn't that too early for a match?" He frowned.

"There's a limited number of pitches, bro," Paul replied. "You should have noticed that there's a game every two hours. But the fixture that worries me is our last group match against Genoa at 7:00 P.M on Thursday."

"Relax," Zachary cut in after he finished perusing through the fixtures. "I would rather face Genoa than either Stuttgart or Zenit. Those academies have produced some really good players over the years."

#### Chapter 49 - Squaring Off Against JFC Riga

The next day.

Coach Johnsen took the players to survey the Skonto Arena first thing in the morning. It was the indoor stadium where they would face the Riga academy in their opening match.

"I advise you to walk around and familiarize yourself with every nook and cranny of the pitch," the Coach said while leading the procession of the NF academy players past the gates of the stadium.

The arena's interior design mimicked a greenhouse with a dome-shaped roof that kept out the snow. Zachary's mood was bolstered by the well maintained artificial turf beneath his feet. He felt relieved that the pitch wouldn't limit his performance against Riga the following day.

After they finished the survey, they played a short warm-up game on the turf before returning to their hotel. The organizers had only allocated them a single hour of training time in the stadium. A few other participating teams were supposed to be using the stadium after they left.

"Rest well today," Coach Johansen intoned as they entered the hotel lobby. "Eat well, drink well, and make sure you stay away from anything that may disrupt your performance tomorrow. And stay away from alcohol." He warned solemnly, turning back to face the players. "Are we clear?"

"Yes, coach," Zachary and his teammates replied, more or less in unison. They attracted a few curious gazes from the hotel occupants and the uniformed waiters/waitresses in the lobby.

"I hope you stay committed to our purpose here. Our goal is to win. Nothing less." He gazed somberly at the players before adding: "We'll meet at 8:00 P.M, just after dinner for the prematch tactical session. See you then." He concluded and turned around as he moved away from the players.

Zachary spent most of his day in the system simulator, except for the brief periods he got meals or went to the washrooms. He was practicing the Bend-it like Beckham Juju the entire time. Since he would be facing strong and unfamiliar opponents, he wanted to have an edge, something that could win games. If his teammates defended well, setpieces would do the trick.

After training in the evening, he ate a sumptuous dinner at the hotel's restaurant with his teammates before heading to one of the board rooms to attend Coach Johansen's tactical meeting.

Zachary and his teammates found the coach in a somber mood when they entered the meeting venue. He was frowning all the time, his expression resembling Mike Tyson's before knocking out an opponent.

"Hurry up and settle down," he intoned. "We have very little time for this. Remember our game starts at 8:00 A.M tomorrow. I want you all tucked into your beds by 10 P.M."

The players hurriedly sank into their seats and waited for their coach to continue.

"We play against Riga tomorrow," the Coach begun. "As we have practiced over the past few weeks, we will use a 5:4:1 formation in this game. I expect you to maintain your focus throughout the entire game. Especially defenders. Remember to close down all the spaces quickly, use a high defensive line to create offside traps, and above all—don't make mistakes. We don't want to serve out opportunities on a silver platter to our opponents..."

Coach Johansen talked at length to the players about the tactics they would employ in the game the following day. He then gave a pep talk to stir them up to win the game. When he finished, he moved on to the prematch routine of naming the starting lineup.

"The starting goalkeeper is Kendrick Otterson in shirt number 1," he read out from a piece of paper.

"We are using three center-backs: No.3 Robin Jatta, No.4 Lars Togstad, and No.5 Daniel Kvande."

"Left-back: No.11 Martin Lundal, Right-back: No.2 Øyvind Alseth."

"Defensive midfield: No.6 Magnus Blakstad." He paused, glancing towards the tall midfielder. "Don't forget you'll be sitting in front of the defenders full time. Keep those aerial balls away from our box." He emphasized once again.

"Yes, coach," Magnus replied politely.

"Moving on," Coach Johansen continued. "Attacking midfield: No.8 Zachary Bemba. Always be ready to switch to the wings when there is a need."

Zachary nodded to indicate that he had gotten the point.

"Right-wing: No.7 Kasongo Paul, Left-wing: No.15 Paul Otterson. Remember to fall back and defend whenever we don't have the ball."

"Striking: No.10 Ørjan Bermark..."

In another sports hall at the Riga Academy, a similar meeting was also taking place.

"NF academy is the weakest team in the tournament," said a short, slightly pot-bellied coach. He was addressing the under-18s who would face off against the NF academy the following day.

"We need to win with a large margin in the first game against the Norwegians. That will increase our chances to qualify for the semifinals..."

After the meeting, Zachary headed back to his room with Kasongo. He washed up and got into bed before 10:00 P.M. However, out of habit, he opened the system interface to check if there were any new notifications.

He felt a sudden flare of delight on noticing that a mission had appeared under the G.O.A.T missions menu once again. A system mission meant either rewards or Juju-points that could help him advance his skills to the next levels.

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## G.O.A.T MISSIONS

### #NEW MISSION: Riga Cup Serial Challenge

->The system has detected that the user is partaking in an international academy tournament. The system has designed an associated mission for the event.

->The user needs to accept the mission first to stand a chance at winning rewards after completing the milestones below.

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\*Milestone 1: Help your team qualify for the knockout stages of the tournament.

\*Milestone 2: Help your team win the semifinals of the tournament.

\*Milestone 3: Help your teammates win the finals and become the champions of the tournament.

\*Milestone 4: Become the top scorer in the tournament.

\*Milestone 5: Become the M.V.P of the tournament.

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\*Rewards:

->Milestone 1 completion reward: 250 Juju-points

->Milestone 2 completion reward: 500 Juju-points

->Milestone 3 completion reward: 1000 Juju-points

->Milestone 4 completion reward: 250 Juju-points

->Milestone 5 completion reward: B-grade Agility Enhancing Elixir

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->The user can choose not to accept the mission.

Accept Reject

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\*Punishment if none of the milestones has been achieved after the stipulated time (In case the user accepts).

->Minus 3000 Juju-points

\*The user has to complete at least one milestone before the tournament ends to escape the penalty.

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\*Remarks: A potential G.O.A.T always achieves what standard players achieve on rare occasions.

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Zachary's spirits brightened after perusing through the new system mission. He had a chance to win 2000 Juju-points and an agility-enhancing-elixir if he completed all the milestones successfully.

He did not hesitate to click the accept button on the system interface. He'd been yearning to acquire a highly graded elixir to enhance his agility to the next level. Furthermore, he would get a chance to upgrade the system if he won 2000 Juju-points—and still have a balance of 1000 points left over to purchase more items from the system shop.

Zachary and his teammates arrived at the Skonto Arena in the allocated team bus at exactly 7:15 A.M the next day. They quickly warmed up and headed back to the dressing room to change into their kits

for the match. They donned their dark blue jerseys, with a sense of urgency, while listening to the final instructions from Coach Johansen.

At exactly 7:50 A.M, they followed the referees and marched onto the pitch to begin the first game in the tournament.

Cheers, mixed with occasional laughter, rose into the air as the two teams trooped on to the pitch. The noises engulfed Zachary, capturing his brain, almost numbing his senses. He quickly realized there were noise problems associated with playing in an enclosed dome. He only hoped his teammates would adjust fast to the changes in their playing environment.

The teams went through the formality of exchanging handshakes with their opponents before separating to the opposite halves of the pitch.

\*FWEEEEEEE!\*

The referee blew the whistle, signaling for the captains to enter the center circle—for the coin toss. Zachary adjusted his armband before jogging towards the referees at the center of the pitch.

"Okay, you know the drill," said the referee. Zachary and the opposing team's captain had just entered the center circle. "You two will choose a side of the coin first—either heads or tails. I'll then proceed with the coin toss. If you win the coin toss, you'll decide which goal to attack in the first half or whether to take the kickoff." He paused and looked back and forth at both Zachary and Riga's short blonde captain, dressed in a black jersey. "Okay?"

Zachary and Riga's captain both nodded.

Riga won the coin toss and decided to kick start the ball. Zachary wasn't the least bit disheartened by his poor luck. He shook hands with the Riga's captain—and the referees before returning to his half.

He observed the opponents in the black jerseys and noticed that they had arrayed themselves in a possibly 4-4-2 formation. He was not yet sure about their exact positioning as their wingers were also on the centerline waiting for the game to start.

Meanwhile, Riga's striker stepped towards the ball in the center circle, sending the fans into a frenzy as they cheered on their home team.

\*FWEEEEEEE!\*

A clear whistle sounded amid the cheers. The first match in the Riga Cup tournament between JFC Riga and NF international kicked off at the Skonto Indoor Stadium.

#### Chapter 50 - A Counterattack

FC Riga kicked-off the first half strongly, passing the ball around the pitch from end to end. Their players arrayed themselves in a 4-4-2 attacking formation. The Latvian fans cheered them on loudly, boosting their morale as the scales tilted in the Riga team's favor.

The NF academy players followed Coach Johansen's instructions to the letter. Ten men stayed behind the ball and left the Riga boys to pass the ball around as much as they wished. Their goal was to lure the Riga team into a false sense of security before killing them off with counterattacks. They were playing a style similar to that adopted by Greece in the 2004 Euro Cup. They were focused on defending first and scoring later if an opportunity arose.

The Riga team pushed Zachary and his teammates back into their half without giving them many opportunities to win back the ball. For the first 12 minutes, they held the majority of the possession, almost 75% percent by Zachary's estimation.

They played short grounded passes at a leisurely pace, advancing deeper towards the NF academy's box. None of their players held on to the ball for more than four touches before passing it on. It was like they were fighting for possession rather than a chance to penetrate the NF academy's box.

Their four midfielders often arrayed themselves in a diamond formation to receive and distribute passes effectively. Their number-6 was the defensive point of the diamond. He ensured that Riga's attacking midfielders always had a free back by positioning himself in front of the defenders.

Their wingers filled the two positions on the left and right of their diamond. The wingers helped out in the middle, relieving their number-6 of the insignificant pressure imposed by Zachary and his teammates. Although the Riga passes were a bit rough around the edges, they were still fluid—at least at the level of an under-18 academy team.

Their short blonde captain completed the diamond as the attacking midfielder. He caused Zachary and his teammates a few problems. He had a good eye for the ball and—was technically strong, sometimes letting loose teasing passes that beat the NF Academy defenders.

In the 12th minute, he unleashed one such a lofted pass from the center circle. One of Riga's forwards latched on to it at the edge of the box after leaving Magnus in the dust. The Riga number-9, a tall dark-haired fellow, controlled the ball with ease and unleashed a right-footed shot that smashed off the crossbar.

The Riga number-9 cursed in a foreign language at the NF academy's good luck. Zachary and his teammates, though, were not the least bit fazed by Riga's missed chance. They had faced similar situations in their friendly matches against the Rosenborg teams a few months prior.

Robin Jatta, NF academy's center-back, timed the resulting ball perfectly and cleared it out of the box with a bicycle kick. Zachary chased after it, following its trajectory mid-air. Four of his teammates that had been defending against Riga's relentless barrage of attacks also followed in quick succession. The boys in blue ran like a pack of wolves with the intent to attack immediately after regaining the ball.

Zachary had already predicted where the ball would land using his Zinedine-Visual-Juju. With his long strides, in motion like the wheels of a racing bike, he got to the ball faster than all the other players in the defensive midfield.

He didn't let it bounce since that would slow down his pace. He chested the ball to the side and wedged it with his angled foot, bringing it under his control with motions as fluid as water.

He then spun and took off towards the other side of the pitch without a pause. He didn't want to waste a single second since Coach Johansen had instructed him to utilize every counterattacking chance to catch the Riga team off-guard. He would follow the coach's instructions to the letter and score a winning goal as quickly as possible.

On looking ahead, he realized that ?rjan B?rmark, the academy's lone striker, had freed himself from his mark and was running towards the right-wing.

Zachary didn't hesitate to kick the ball towards him without pausing his run. The two of them played a one-two, getting past two Riga midfielders, and soon stepped into the opposing half. Their passing was seamless, exploiting the spaces in the wings, bearing down on Riga's goal.

Soon, Zachary decided to go solo since ?rjan couldn't match his pace. After collecting a short pass from the striker, he bolted towards Riga's 18-yard box like his life depended on it. He was much faster than he had been a few months prior, thanks to his grueling winter training and consumption of the D-grade agility elixir.

A defender extended his long legs to steal the ball at his feet. However, Zachary flicked the ball to his left foot, beyond the defender's reach, and continued his dash towards Riga's goal. He wove past the four defenders with his formidable alternating pace, like a drifting cloud blown by the wind.

Zachary had nothing else in his sights except for two obstacles; the defenders blocking his path towards Riga's goal.

He didn't pause to dribble, but circled past them, cutting into the pitch, towards the box. He was sure they couldn't match his speed. In his mind, he was already picturing the way he would beat the goalkeeper and score NF academy's first goal.

However, as he got past the second to last defender before entering Riga's box, he felt a tug on his shirt. Zachary cursed inwardly as the defender's foul play messed up his dribbling rhythm, slowing him down. Worst of all, the center-back would get away without a red-card since he hadn't been the last man. NF academy's counter would then end up fruitless unless they scored from the resulting freekick.

He didn't want to bet on his Bend-it like Beckham Juju since he hadn't perfected it yet. He focused his mind, searching for a way to shake off the defender. However, the grip on his shirt tightened, pulling him back and almost taking him to the ground. Zachary's mood sank. He started planning to dramatize his tumble, hopefully influencing the referee to send off the player that was holding him back.

However, in the corner of his eye, he noticed a dark shadow rushing by—into the box. The Zinedine-Visual-Juju was at work again.