

## **Greatest 61**

### Chapter 61 - NF Academy Vs BK Frem II

However, as the match progressed into the second half, NF academy cashed in on their superior possession.

Zachary sighed again-and-again at the effectiveness of Coach Johansen's message at the end of the previous game. All the players were very focused and played with ambition while taking minimal risks as they bore down on BK Frem's goal.

The NF academy showcased great teamwork by exchanging short passes and one-twos, waiting to open the BK Frem defense and hit them swiftly on the break.

Zachary created the game-changing opportunity in the 54th minute when he tricked his way to the edge of the box. He managed to unleash a howitzer shot towards the inside of the right post. However, BK Frem's goalkeeper was well-positioned to pull off a brilliant save. The ball went out of play, a few inches wide of the post. The referee pointed to the corner flag.

Øyvind Alseth, NF academy's right wingback, took the corner, whipping a teasing ball into the box. He managed to find Magnus, who out-jumped all the defenders and tried his luck with a header from around the penalty spot. His effort was precise enough to go past BK Frem's goalkeeper—into the top right corner of the net.

1:0.

The NF academy had managed to score their first goal against a weaker team after 56 minutes. It seemed to open the floodgates. The BK Frem midfielders lost their morale and started making a lot of amateur mistakes.

Zachary began noticing a lot of exploitable gaps in BK Frem's defensive profile. In the 60th minute, he peeled away from his markers using a well-executed Cruyff turn and accelerated towards the goal.

Although he hadn't managed to achieve the instinctual state of flowing with the ball—like in the previous match, he could still execute the move swiftly.

He dribbled past four defenders, managing to win himself enough space inside the box and score NF academy's second goal.

However, he didn't relax after scoring.

For the following ten minutes, he was on fire. He tackled players, intercepted passes, and dribbled past opponents with ease. He managed to score three more goals in the 63rd, the 68th, and the 71st minutes. Due to his efforts, NF academy was ahead by five goals with eighteen minutes left to play. Yet, he still had a lot of stamina left.

Zachary felt like he was in his best shape ever. The ball listened to him, and the goddess of luck was on his side. He wanted to score more goals. That would get him closer to completing one of the milestones of the system mission. However, Coach Johansen substituted him—out in the 75th minute, cutting his playing time on the pitch short.

"You need some rest," the coach said, patting Zachary on the back. "We want you to be in your best shape when you face Genoa. That will be the true test for us." The coach added to emphasize his point.

Zachary nodded before taking his seat on the bench. He understood the coach's decision, but he still felt a little bit indignant. He probably had the best stamina and endurance among the academy players, graded at A+ by the system. However, the coach had taken him out earlier than other players who were more prone to tiring out fast.

Zachary chugged down more water from a bottle and returned his attention to the match. His teammates were still dictating play on the pitch. They even managed to score another goal in the 85th minute. However, they wasted a lot of chances. They didn't fully capitalize on the mistakes made by the BK Frem players.

Nonetheless, the game ended with a score of 6:0, in favor of the NF academy.

Zachary felt that he could have led the team to a greater victory—had he been allowed to stay on the pitch. Although he'd scored four goals, he was still bitter.

He felt mad at the coach for taking him off the pitch too early. He covered his face with his shirt to hide the frown outlined on it. He didn't even stand up and greet the rest of his teammates when they exited the field after the final whistle.

"Hey man," Kasongo greeted him right after the match. "You played a nice game as usual. We now have six points in the bag and are top of our group."

Zachary uncovered his face and noticed that his friend was looming over him, smiling. He was quite happy since he had scored NF academy's sixth goal.

While looking at his friend, he took a moment to reflect on his emotions. He wondered why he suddenly felt angered by a simple substitution—which was a sound tactical decision by the coach.

[Do I still have a problem with mood swings like in my previous life?] He mused, feeling a chill run down his spine. The thought unsettled him—to some extent.

Zachary sighed, shaking his head. In his previous life, he had fought with his coaches, teammates, and opponents regularly. His bitterness over his unsecured football career had fueled his unsportsmanlike behavior. His bad-temper had contributed to his swift exit from the squad of TP Mazembe.

In professional sports, a player had to be in perfect control of his emotions to succeed. A single moment of instability could lead his team to a loss in an important game. Zachary had watched Zinedine Zidane, the French legend, lose a World Cup final in such a manner. He was glad he had noticed such a marked weakness before it could do any harm to his career. He resolved to find a way to strengthen his mental capabilities as soon as possible.

For a moment, he let his mind focus on his happiest moments in the past few days to chase away any lingering negativity. He soaked in the memories of the moments when he dashed past players or scored goals in the previous matches. The action was calming, and he felt his mood lighten after a few seconds.

"Are you okay man," Kasongo inquired, waving his hand in front of Zachary's face. "Why are you zoning out? The referee is calling for you to receive the match ball."

"Just a moment." Zachary flashed his friend a soft smile. "I'll be there as soon as possible. And, congratulations on scoring your first goal in the tournament, by the way." He said.

## Chapter 62 - Group Results And New Skills

"JFC Riga managed to hold the Genoa Youth team to a 1:1 draw," Paul Otterson said excitedly.

[A draw against Genoa! How did the Riga team manage that?] Zachary thought, surprised. He'd watched the match between BK Frem and Genoa and concluded that the Italian team was by far the most powerful adversary in their group. He wondered how a JFC Riga—a team that lost against the NF academy by four goals had managed to pull off a draw. [Doesn't that mean...]

"Do you know what this means?" Paul continued, interrupting Zachary's train of thought. "We've already qualified for the quarter-finals." He banged the table excitedly, attracting a few frowns from the rest of the diners in the restaurant.

Excited chatters rang around the table. Zachary and his teammates were seated around the long dining tables in the Monika Centrum Hotel's restaurant, waiting—as the uniformed waiters continued to bring in trays with dinner from the kitchen.

Words could be challenging to make out in the deep buzz of the restaurant. However, Zachary could hear his teammates chattering about which team they would face in the quarter-finals.

They were still in a cheery mood since they'd won the match against BK Frem by a six-goal margin earlier that day. The news about Genoa's draw with JFC Riga was like icing on the cake, fanning their euphoria even further. So, they bumped fists together, hugged each other like little girls, celebrating Genoa's draw.

Zachary smiled softly, his mood lifting. He'd been worried about the next game. He had already prepared to play his best against Genoa—to guarantee NF academy's qualification for the quarter-finals. Yet, Genoa had gone ahead and done him a favor. He felt waves of excitement emanating from his psyche, like a new spring bud that grows into the vibrant flower so naturally, one moment at a time. He was in a state of bliss.

"What about the group B results?" Zachary inquired, eyeing his flatmate. He'd taken a nap right after lunch and then trained in the system simulator—until dinner time. He hadn't gotten the chance to hear any news about the other group matches in the Riga tournament.

Zachary's table once again descended into silence as Paul Otterson cleared his throat. "The results of Group B are more surprising," Paul intoned, smiling mysteriously. "Zenit is leading the group after winning 3:2 against Tottenham on Monday, then going on to defeat AIK Stockholm, 2:1 this afternoon."

Paul paused as a waiter walked over, placing a tray of food before him: yummy smoked fish with rye bread, crescent-shaped Latvian pastries, and vegetables. The sight and aroma of the dish were enough to make Zachary hungrier than he already was. He wished the waiters would hurry up and bring his meal as well.

"Tottenham also managed to win the game against Atalanta today by a score of 4:2," Paul continued, picking up a knife and a fork. "Zenit is leading their group by six points, followed by Tottenham at three points. AIK and Atalanta trail with one point each. Their group seems really tough." He said, cutting off a piece of his fish and placing it in his mouth. The rest of the table mates gulped since their food hadn't arrived yet.

"We'll have to face one of the two teams that emerge from that group," Kasongo chipped in. "I wonder who will be first. Tottenham or Zenit?"

"I wouldn't worry about Tottenham," Kendrick said after sipping on his juice. "My friends, playing for AIK, have already informed me that Tottenham's squad isn't in the best shape. On the other hand, it would be better if we could avoid facing the Zenit Youth team in the quarter-finals by all means. They have a very tight defense and are really good at scoring from corners."

"Exactly," Paul cut in after swallowing a mouthful of food. "We should try our best to come first in our group. We'll only have a much easier time if we play against another team from that group. Zenit has managed to beat both Tottenham and AIK Stockholm so far."

The conversation slowed down as waiters continued bringing in food. Most of the players turned their attention to the dinner on their plates. Meals were their favorite time of the day—since they got the chance to replenish the calories burnt after using their muscles.

"A draw against Genoa tomorrow evening will keep us at the top of our group," Zachary observed, smiling softly. One of the waiters had finally brought his dinner. It was different from Paul's. On his tray was a Rasol—a local Latvian dish made from potato salad, with several layers of meat, hard-boiled eggs, and vegetables, all held together with mayonnaise. He'd also ordered a smoked fish and rye bread. He got right to eating and continued listening to the conversation.

He was pleased with the organizers of the Riga Tournament, especially in the feeding department. Players had a choice to order up to four dishes, recommended by their coaches, from their hotel's restaurant. Zachary and his teammates always ate like nouveau-rich tourists.

"Group C is the weirdest of the groups," Kendrick commented, in between mouthfuls of food. "VfB Stuttgart beat Skonto Academy 8:1 on Monday. Today they defeated Olimpiki Tbilisi, a team from Georgia, by nine goals to two."

"I hear that one of their players is also like Zachary and has managed to score seven goals in two matches," Kasongo observed. He was taking small, careful bites of food.

"Someone called Timo Werner," Paul chipped in, sighing. "He's a very skilled forward—a natural number-9 supported by several good midfielders from VfB Stuttgart's academy."

"I hear they've got another star player—Joshua Kimmich. He has got the most assists on their team," Kendrick said, leaning forward, cutting into his fried salmon. "Their team may be the strongest in the tournament."

Kasongo smiled softly. "It's great that they can only possibly meet us in the semis or finals," he said before seeping on his juice.

"Have any of you got any news of results from group D?" Zachary inquired. He was almost halfway through his meal.

"That should have been the easiest group." Paul sighed, shaking his head. "The last time I checked, Ado Den Haag was leading with three points. I'm not aware of how they performed in the matches today."

"We should be worrying about the game tomorrow instead," Kendrick intoned, rolling his eyes. "I don't want to lose against Genoa."

"Good point, Kendrick." Zachary nodded, giving his flatmate a thumbs-up. "I wonder why Coach Johansen hasn't called for the pre-match tactical meeting. It usually happens on the day before a game."

"I think we'll have the meeting tomorrow morning," Paul replied. "The match is scheduled for 7:00 in the evening."

After dinner, Zachary and Kasongo headed back to their room. They talked a bit about the matches for a few more minutes—until Kasongo got tired and entered his bed for the night.

Zachary glanced at his watch, noticing that it was still 8:00 PM. He'd slept for a few hours after the BK Frem match and didn't feel drowsy yet.

He decided to train in the system simulator for a few hours before going to bed. So, he opened the G.O.A.T Skills tab to select the skills he would practice in the simulator.

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->G.O.A.T Skills: 5

(i) ZINEDINE VISUAL JUJU

(1st-level: Progress: 72.021%)

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(ii) ZACHARY-ARROW-SHOT

(2nd-level: Progress: 1%)

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(iii) BEND-IT LIKE BECKHAM JUJU

(1st-level: Progress: 72.43%)

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(iv) Cruyff-turn

(Progress: 100%, Mastered.)

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(v) Ronaldinho's Elastico Dribble

(1st-level Progress: 32%)

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->G.O.A.T Skills Simulator

\*Activate \*Deactivate

(Activation costs 2 Juju-points per hour)

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Zachary had noticed that the Cruyff-turn and the Elastico-dribble had been—added to his G.O.A.T skills after the match against JFC Riga. It seemed like every skill he successfully performed on the pitch would be included in his G.O.A.T skills tab. Most likely, he had to execute the moves on the playing field first, before the system could add them to his repertoire.

The system would then develop a specialized training program for those skills in the simulator.

He was in a good mood since he could practice the new skills in the system simulator. For the past two nights, he'd practiced the Cruyff-turn to a complete mastery of 100%. That was why he had been able to use it efficiently in the match against BK Frem earlier that day.

The G.O.A.T Skills Simulator was the perfect virtual reality training program. The 3D models of football stars in the simulator could easily implant the required body motions, postures, and reflexes needed by a player to perform a move. That was how Zachary had managed to advance his set-piece technique in a short period.

However, he understood that fitness was the basis of his skill development. With the help of the elixirs from the system, he was able to improve his fitness quickly, enabling him to learn the skills without much effort.

He was sure that he would have found it impossible to master the Cruyff-turn, for instance, if he didn't have A- graded body control. He would have tumbled to the ground on every single attempt if his balance and coordination didn't meet the skill requirements. That would be analogous to fitting a Bugatti engine into a Toyota Corona. It wouldn't be able to power the car to speeds beyond 300km/hr without all the specialized systems and aerodynamic shape of the original vehicle. The vehicle would 'simply' fall apart if you pushed it too far without specialized stabilizers, braking systems, tires, shock absorbers, and other parts.

So, Zachary had resolved to intensify his fitness training when he returned to Trondheim after the tournament. He would have to train his body in advance before he received any more skills from the system. That was the best way to prepare for the later stages of his career.

Zachary sighed and forcefully broke himself out of his contemplation. Physical fitness training could wait. He had to focus on the match against Genoa Youth the following day at 7:00 PM.

He activated the G.O.A.T Skills Simulator, spent two Juju-points, and started practicing the Bend-it like Beckham Juju for the next one hour. He had a feeling that the freekick technique would come in handy soon.

## Chapter 63 - Against Genoa Youth

Coach Johansen called for the prematch tactical meeting only two hours prior to the match against Genoa. The players were surprised by the change in the usual scheduling of the meeting. However, they still attended without complaint. A coach was practically a monarch in a team. Players had to follow his instructions with no objections.

They became even more surprised when the coach announced the starting line-up. Some, like Magnus and ?yvind, even went on to complain openly to the coach. The meeting room was in chaos for more than half a minute as the players murmured their discontent among their ranks.

"Quiet," Coach Johansen bellowed, his face hardening as he glared at the players. The room once again descended into silence as the young men waited for the coach to explain himself.

"As I already said," Coach Johansen began, "Zachary, ?rjan, and Kendrick will all start on the bench today. We need to rest some of our key players in preparation for the quarter-final. We are here to win the tournament, not just the group stages." He said firmly.

"But coach," Magnus intoned. "We'll face a tougher opponent in the quarter-final if we lose this game. Would it not be better for us to win this match and improve our overall chances in the knock-out stages? For that, we need Zachary and ?rjan to score goals."

"What gave the impression that I'm giving away this game?" The coach queried, his frown deepening. "All of you are the same age as your opponents. You've got to learn how to play without Zachary. He can't continue carrying the whole team through matches. That is a very unhealthy habit for a team that is vying for the title."

"In this game, I will require only one thing from you," Coach Johansen continued. "Do not concede any goals. You've got to defend like your life depends on it. All players, except Kim, who will play striking

today—have to stay behind the ball, close down opponents quickly, and leave no gaps for Genoa to exploit. If you manage to achieve that, we'll still be at the top of the group. Are we clear?"

"Yes, coach," all the players replied, more or less in unison.

The match began at exactly 7:00 PM in the Skonto Arena indoor stadium. Zachary sat on the bench, huddled together with the rest of the subs, watching Genoa outplay his team. It was late in the first half, and if Zachary had to be totally honest with himself, he would admit that he was angry at his teammates since the scoreboard read NF ACADEMY 0, GENOA YOUTH 1. He couldn't help it. They had made an amateur defensive mistake in the first few minutes, gifting a goal to Said Ahmed, Genoa's central striker.

As the match progressed, Zachary could see that the NF Academy players were trying their best to defend and mark their opponents. But they were still outclassed in all areas of the game. The Italian team had faster players who worked together—like those of an experienced professional team. Their teamwork was seamless, outshining NF academy.

The Genoa youth team used the 4-3-3 formation, with three strikers and three midfielders continuously bearing down—on NF academy's goal. They played with a high defensive line, typically applying the offside trap, with midfielders providing support to defenders to make more passing options available. Their style of play, characterized by short triangular movements and passing, was a feast for the eyes. They worked the ball from left to right through a combination of sideways, backward, and coordinated passes, in-between the opposition's defensive lines.

Genoa created most of the chances depending on through balls and performing give-and-go passes, usually involving their three midfielders. They didn't allow the NF academy players any breathing space. They passed the ball quickly around the pitch, looking for chances to penetrate the box.

However, Zachary's teammates remained steadfast and defended against all the attacks until the middle of the second half.

In the 75th minute, a below-par clearance gave Genoa a chance to shore up their lead. One of the strikers, playing on the flanks, picked up the loose ball right outside the box. He immediately passed to

Said Ahmed, the central striker. The number-9 latched on to the pin-point pass within the box and unleashed a daisy-cutter shot towards the bottom right corner.

Zachary winced despite himself as he watched the ball flash by Mathew Stevenson, NF academy's substitute goalkeeper, into the back of the net. The Genoa team was ahead by two goals in the 76th minute.

Zachary stood up from the bench and moved closer to the coach. A small spark in his mind hinted at a necessary change in NF Academy's midfield. He thought the coach would substitute him in after the team had conceded the second goal. Zachary straightened his posture and performed a few stretches to show the coach that he was ready for action. He was itching to go on the pitch and play the remaining minutes.

However, Coach Johansen gave him a flat stare—like he was nothing but air before going back to shouting at the players on the pitch. His offhandedness told Zachary all he needed to know. He wouldn't play in the game that day.

"Tighten the defense," the coach yelled at the top of his lungs. "We can't afford to concede any more goals. Daniel and Lars; push the defensive line forward. You can't let them play so close to our box..."

Zachary slumped back in his seat on the bench, wondering whether Coach Johansen had decided to give up the match from the start.

"I told you already that he wanted to throw this game," Kendrick said from his left side. "I could already read his intentions when he left you and ?rjan out of the starting line-up." He sighed.

"I suspected so at the beginning but later dismissed the fact," Zachary intoned, shaking his head. "I can't believe that Coach Johansen is one to throw matches!"

"Me, too." Kendrick smiled softly. "I understand his target is to win the cup, not the group stages. That's what he said. But we have got a free day tomorrow since the quarter-finals begin on Saturday. We could have played today and still gotten enough rest before the knock-outs."

Zachary frowned. "I heard that Zenit and Tottenham, both, won their last group games earlier today. Maybe, he wanted to face Zenit rather than Tottenham in the quarter-finals."

"That doesn't make sense," Kendrick mumbled, shaking his head. "From the information your agent gave us, we can tell that Zenit is by far the hardest-to-defeat foe in this tournament, with the possible exception of VfB Stuttgart. Why would Coach Johansen decide to face such a team early in the knock-out stages?"

"Maybe, he knows something we don't..." Zachary let his voice trail off as he focused his attention back on the pitch. The Genoa players showed perfect teamwork, controlling the ball with seamless short passes, penetrating deeper into NF academy's half. One of the midfielders received a pass and quickly slid the ball through the defense—to one of the strikers on the left flank.

The Genoa number-11 showed brilliant composure as he entered the box. He latched on to the precise pass and produced a glorious strike that deflected off the post into the top left corner.

3:0. Genoa had managed to score the third goal against the NF academy in the 82nd minute.

"Shit," Zachary swore despite himself. He rested his head in his hands since he couldn't continue watching the match.

He knew he would feel angrier if he continued watching his team struggle against their opponents. He'd always been a sore loser, even in his previous life. He hated losing, even in small soccer games held in the backyard of his former school. However, what made the loss against Genoa more frustrating was the fact that he couldn't do anything about it. There was nothing more frustrating than watching your team lose while on the bench.

Moreover, he was missing out on an opportunity to achieve one of the system mission milestones. Timo Werner had scored two more goals earlier that day, lifting his total tally to nine. The German striker was ahead of him by two goals as the top scorer for the tournament. Yet, he was stuck on the bench—with no opportunity to catch up. He was frustrated.

"Tighten the defense, mark their forwards, use long balls..." Zachary heard Coach Johansen yelling again from near the touchline.

"He seems quite serious about the game in his commentary," Kendrick commented.

Zachary sighed audibly, forcing himself to steady his emotions. "I guess we'll be facing Zenit in the quarter-finals," he remarked, returning his attention to the match. The Genoa players were still attacking like there was no tomorrow. However, the NF academy players managed to block most of their attempts towards their goal in the final minutes of play. The game ended with a score of 3:0 in favor of Genoa.

"We should head back to the bus," Kendrick suggested, getting up from his seat. Zachary did not reply. His focus was on the Genoa players celebrating after the final whistle. Meanwhile, his teammates trekked out of the pitch with their shoulders slouched forward, giving off a grumpy vibe.

Zachary was worried that the loss could have affected their confidence. He sure hoped that Coach Johansen was well aware of what he'd just put them through and had a way to lift their morale quickly before the next game. Otherwise, they were in for a depressing quarter-final against Zenit.

Zachary sighed, shaking his head. "Let's head to the bus," he intoned, leading the way out of the stadium. There was nothing he could do for the rest of his teammates. Coach Johansen was the best person to motivate them after their loss.

#### Chapter 64 - Post-Match Recovery

Friday was a day off for Zachary and his teammates. Even the usually no-nonsense Coach Johansen had advised the players to get some rest after playing the last group match the previous day. They could afford to take a break since their quarter-final match against Zenit was—slated for Sunday afternoon.

Zachary woke up late, at 9:00 AM, cleaned up, and had his breakfast. His muscles were tense, and he still felt sullen after the loss the previous day. However, a night of ample rest had settled his mind.

"Zachary, there you are," Magnus called, interrupting his breakfast. "We have to go to the gym with Coach Bjørn."

"Isn't this our day off?"

Magnus smiled ruefully. "Coach Bjørn says it's a day of rest, not a day off. There's a difference. As part of our schedule, we have to do some exercise to recover faster from fatigue."

"At what time are we supposed to head to the gym?" Zachary inquired, in between mouthfuls of his breakfast.

"Right now," Magnus replied, eyeing the full plate of eggs, bread, and fruits before Zachary. "Most of the other players are already waiting at the bus. I'm rounding up the slackers. You need to hurry."

"Crap," Zachary cursed. "Why were we not informed of this yesterday?"

Magnus spread out his hands, his shoulders rising in a casual shrug. "I heard about this gym work today as well."

"I'll be there within 10 minutes," Zachary said, increasing the speed at which he was gobbling down his breakfast.

"Okay. But hurry up. Coach Bjørn is waiting." He added before rushing out of the uncrowded restaurant.

Zachary smiled—ruefully as he emptied his glass of milk. He'd just remembered that he had a date scheduled with Marta Romano. He called her to cancel and reschedule it for the afternoon as he ran to the bus.

"Good morning, players," Coach Bjørn greeted them at the gym.

"Good morning, coach," all the players returned the greeting more or less in unison. They were seated on mats in the weights section of the People Fitness Gym.

"I'm sorry to call you in for some training on your day off," Coach Bjørn began. "However, you're academy players above all else. It's important that I teach you how to accelerate your recovery after a tough 90-minute game. I don't want any cases of players limping across the hotel lobby the day after a match. The end goal of the exercises we'll be going through is to relax your tired muscles."

He smiled at the players, moving through their ranks. "It's imperative to recoup your energy reserves right after every game. We often provide you with milk chocolate drinks for proteins and carbohydrates

in one hit during that critical time for muscles to recover energy right after games. We've also advised you to soak in ice baths to get rid of aches and pains in the short term during this tournament."

He raised an eyebrow, letting his gaze roam across the players. "How many of you have been diligently taking ice baths after every match?" He asked after a slight pause. *all new stories at nOve/lbi/n(.)com*

Most of the players, including Zachary, raised their hands. Zachary had been soaking in iced water for ten minutes after every match, even in his previous life. He had found the tactic useful for fast recovery from muscle fatigue after intensive exercise.

"That's good." Coach Bjørn nodded in approval. He flexed his muscles, covered by only a vest, making him look like a bodybuilder rather than a soccer coach. "We've also been advising you to eat highly nutritious food within two hours after the match to replenish depleted energy reserves. That's why your approved dinner and lunch menus consist of dishes rich in carbohydrates and protein and plenty of green vegetables."

Coach Bjørn folded his arms across his chest and continued his lecture. "I'm telling you all this to give you an understanding of the sort of routine you need to get into to recover quickly from fatigue when you go pro. Being a professional involves consecutive intensive matches like you're experiencing in this tournament."

"However, food and rest aren't all you need to recover quickly after an intensive game. We're here today to help you recover even faster."

"We'll start by hitting the bike for 30 minutes. Let's keep the exercise at a moderate intensity. The goal of the exercise is to have a slight warm-up. Then, we'll stretch all our essential muscle groups for 30 seconds for each. I'll lead the stretching routine and use foam rollers to guide your postures. After that, our massage therapists will help you relax your muscles. Any questions?"

None of the players raised their hands. They'd been stretching routinely at the academy. They were familiar with the routine.

"I expect you to pay close attention to the stretching exercises. Follow my lead, and don't deviate. For now, let's start with the bike." He clapped his hands to shoo them off.



They spent the next two hours following Coach Bjorn's routine.

He was in charge of physical fitness at the academy. Zachary did not doubt the efficacy of his muscle relaxation exercises in post-match recovery. He started with cycling, then stretched using the foam roller, following the coach's lead.

When he was—finished, he headed to the massage room. In that room with scented candles, pervaded by relaxing music, the massage soothed his body in ways nothing else could. His body responded to the ministrations of the massage therapist. Zachary didn't know her—but his muscles and joints were in love with her hands.

The massage stretched out his muscles, working out knots, giving his body well-earned bliss. Even though the pressure hurt at times, it left an overall sensation of wellness. When the session ended, Zachary felt as light as a feather, all burdens on his mind eliminated.

He had been doing a lot of exercises, which took a toll on his body. He looked great but had felt like a car in need of a service. He'd just realized that professional sports massage therapy could be the service.

He walked out of the massage room with a swagger, rivaling that of any world-famous hip-hop artist. The massage therapy had taken him briefly out of time and space, to exist without any worries. He made a mental note to add more massage sessions in future training routines.

"That massage was heaven on earth," Kasongo commented as he fell into step with him when he was moving towards the bus. "I feel like I'm ready to face Zenit right now." He smiled like a rogue and did a few basic stretches from Coach Bjorn's routine.

"I wanted more time, but the masseuse refused," Paul commented, sighing from behind him.

Kendrick, by his side, nodded. "What will you guys do with your free time? Should we go play some table tennis?" He asked, mopping a hand through his tousled brown hair.

"Count me out," Zachary was the first to object, raising his hands in a placating gesture. The four of them had stopped just outside the gym, waiting for their teammates.

His friends raised their eyebrows in questioning gestures.

"You're not hanging out with us?" Paul asked, creasing his brows. "What are you up to?"

"Don't ask," Zachary replied firmly. "I've got a few plans of my own for today." He decided not to tell them about his date with Marta Romano. He wasn't ready to turn into the next hot gossip topic among his teammates.

"Why the secrecy?" Kasongo chipped in, smiling sheepishly. "Did you meet a hot Latvian supermodel you don't want us to see and report to the coach?"

"That's is a possibility," Kendrick chipped in, nodding his head like a hen pecking grain.

"With the way he's been playing, I wouldn't be surprised," Paul added with a serious face. The three rhymed like they were from a music band.

"Okay, guys," Zachary interrupted. "Stop with the jests. You know me. I just need some time alone to settle my mind for the Sunday quarter-final. I think a walk around the city, on my own, will do me wonders. That's all." He lied with a straight face.

"Hmmm!" The guys expressed their doubt, more or less in unison.

"Let's get into the bus," Zachary said, changing the topic. "Coach Bjørn just came out of the gym. I'm famished and need some lunch." He added as he led the way towards the bus.

#### Chapter 65 - A Date With Marta

After gobbling up his lunch, Zachary walked to a park, a short distance away from the hotel—and found Marta Romano waiting. Around her, wintry ice-laden trees swayed like graceful ballet dancers in the seasonal gusts. The Italian wore a dark brown overcoat, skin-tight jeans, and boots that shielded her from the cold weather.

"Have you been waiting for long?" Zachary asked, feeling a bit guilty. He feared that he was late, letting her wait in the harsh weather.

"No worries," she replied, flashing him a smile. "I just got here, only a minute ago." She gave him a simple hug.

"That's a relief." Zachary sighed, glancing at his watch. "I didn't expect you to arrive earlier than we agreed. Should we go now?"

Marta flashed him a smile in response.

And off they went on a tour of the city.

Zachary felt surprisingly warm in the sunshine and cold, despite the presence of the chilly north wind. After the relaxing massage, a walk through the city seemed like the best way to end his Friday.

"I watched your match yesterday," Marta began. "You remained on the bench the entire time." She added, inclining her head, to get a better look at his reaction. They walked on a path by a frozen river on the far side of the park.

"The coach decided I had to rest in preparation for the quarter-final," Zachary replied, his mind drifting. He mused on what a strange day it was to take a walk around Riga.

He watched the river on his right in passing. It appeared tranquil—yet still flowed lethargically under the ice, seemingly awaiting reinvigoration by the gentle touch of a warmer sun. Though the air bore the cold and the ground was completely frozen, the ice atop it sparkled with the gift of each nascent ray.

It was as if the creator (if there was one) had ensured there would be hope even on the most frigid of winter days. Zachary chose not to see the ice blanket but the life-filled water flowing deep underneath, ever onward to the distant ocean.

"Are you still with me?" Zachary's reverie was interrupted by Marta's voice as they trekked the footpath.

"Sorry," he said, shaking his head and focusing on the girl. "I was thinking about our loss against Genoa yesterday. It worries me." He lied. He couldn't tell her he was admiring a frozen river, rather than giving her his undivided attention. The loss was a credible excuse to avoid an awkward situation.

"Does it hurt when you lose a game?" She asked.

Zachary was confused by the question. He angled his head to get a better look at her, only to find her eyes filled with pure curiosity. "Of course, it's always painful to lose a game," he replied, deciding on humoring her. "Some players even cry after a loss. If I ever lost a final, I would be in the same boat—I think."

They continued making small talk as they walked, leaving the path by a river and joining a wide street. In the refreshing light of daytime, the streets had the hues of an artistic dream, soft yet bold pastels.

"Which part of Italy are you from?" Zachary inquired. He'd never really asked about her home. He wanted to keep the conversation flowing as they moved around the city, enjoying the sights and taking the occasional photograph.

"Milan," she replied, smiling.

"The home city of AC and Inter Milan!"

"Yes, the one, and only."

Zachary looked at her curiously. "Are you a fan of either of those teams?"

"When I was younger, I used to support AC Milan," Marta replied, sighing audibly.

Zachary noted the melancholia in her tone. "You still support them. Right?" He queried.

"Not anymore," she confirmed, shaking her head.

"What happened?" Zachary pressed.

"Things happened," she shook her head, closing her eyes as if remembering some unpleasant memory. She even ceased walking for a moment.

Zachary silently waited by her side.

"I also used to play football when I was younger," she said, inclining her head to glance Zachary's way. "However, things happened. I lost my love for the sport and my awe for the team."

[Which things?] Zachary could not help but wonder. However, he didn't press the topic. He could tell it was a bitter memory that would sour the conversation.

They continued walking silently along the pedestrian lane of the street. Traffic was sprinkled upon the tarmac that day as if the roads were a playset that came with only a few cars.

About an hour later, Zachary spent a few Latvian Lats to buy sandwiches and hot coffee before they continued their tour. They trekked on the cobblestone streets, past sociable squares with the oldest houses and churches, all tourist attractions in Riga.

Riga was a collection of Art Nouveau architecture, easily identifiable by its curved doorways and windows, female sculptures, whimsical gargoyles, and romantic nationalist imagery. Marta marveled at the House of the Blackheads when they reached the Town Hall Square in the old town of Riga. She took several pictures of the exuberantly adorned red-brown brick building with plenty of statues hanging on its front.

Zachary was surprised at how the day passed quicker than he'd expected. Before he knew it, the evening had arrived, prompting him to head back to his hotel for dinner.

"So, what will you do after the academy?" Marta asked as he walked her back to her hostel. The evening sun cast long shadows on the cobbled streets.

"Play professional soccer, of course," Zachary replied, his tone a matter-of-factly.

"You'll play for Rosenborg?"

"That's the plan, for the moment," Zachary replied, smiling softly. "But, enough about me. How is your music school? How did you go from playing soccer to becoming a music student? The two fields are almost unrelated!"

Marta gave him an arch look. "That is a story for another time. You'll have to take me out another time to hear that. We're here." She said, pointing to a hostel building ahead. "Do you want to take dinner together at a nearby fast-food restaurant?"

"Sorry," Zachary intoned. "The coach will not be pleased if I don't get back by six. He even takes roll calls in the evening. I can only disappoint you."

"No worries. I already had a good time." Marta flashed him a soft smile. "My sister should be waiting for me to have dinner. I'll go meet her," she said but did not move a step into her hostel building.

Zachary sighed inwardly. Marta had been a close friend for over a year. But he'd never thought more of her than that. However, seeing her limned in the scarce winter sun rays, the cold Baltic wind blowing the long braids of her black hair from her face, hugging her arms against the swell of her bosom to ward off the chill, she was suddenly a young woman. He was suddenly a young man, not a reincarnated old soul.

His pulse quickened at the way she watched him with expectation. It seemed she expected something of him. But he reined himself in and gave her a gentle hug instead. "I'll call you," he said before walking away.

He decided against encouraging her feelings for him. He wasn't sure it was the right time to pursue a relationship. His relationships had always been marred by complications. Complications brought about instability, and instability would slow the progress of his career.

After Zachary left, Marta sighed, shaking her head before walking into her building. She found her sister, Melissa, sleeping when she entered her room.

She smiled softly on remembering her final moments with Zachary, the way he was unbalanced and undecided as he watched her before the door of her building.

She'd seen Zachary playing against BK Frem and JFC Riga, and he struck her like one of those firm men that never doubted themselves. But she'd just realized that he was a reserved person off the pitch. Marta smiled despite herself. She was in a good mood.

However, she felt her phone vibrating in one of her pockets. Her face paled when she read the caller-ID off the screen of her smartphone. She stepped out of her room, out of earshot of her sister, to pick up the call. She then took a deep breath, calming her nerves before speaking into the phone.

"Hello, Grant," she said, her tone formal but also polite. "To what do I owe the pleasure of your call?" She had lost her signature Italian accent.

"How far with your assignment?" The voice from the other end of the phone inquired, without bothering with any greetings.

"I'm trying," Marta intoned, attempting to keep her voice polite. "I need more time."

"Do I need to teach you how to get close to a young boy?" Marta winced as the voice at the other end scowled. "I'm running out of time, and I need your task completed as soon as possible. Have you made no progress? Nothing to offer me that I can use?"

"I need more time," Marta replied, simply.

"I'm running out of patience," the voice intoned, taking on a harsh but quiet tone. "Don't forget who pays for your music school and living expenses. I'll be disappointed if you fail." The person at the other end of the line hung up right after.

Marta's eyes moistened as memories of how she'd ended up in her present circumstances flooded her mind. But a girl had to do what she had to do to survive. She would try her best to complete Grant's assignment.

Chapter 66 - Against Zenit Цwop I

From the technical area, Coach Johansen watched his players take on Zenit цwop in the quarter-final. The match turned out to be as tough as he'd expected.

The Zenit players, in their white jerseys, had the most compact defense in the tournament. They played in a 4-4-2 formation, with the defenders often feeding strikers aerial balls, skipping the midfield.

Coach Johansen kept his attention on his squad, in blue jerseys. He was looking for the occasional sign of complacency—characteristic of inexperienced players.

A team was like a machine, with several moving parts. The players were supposed to function as a collective whole. They had to complement the abilities of one another in the best way they can. Any lack of focus in just a couple of players could drastically impair the team's performance. Coach Johansen couldn't afford to let that happen. Not in a quarter-final match where a loss would lead to elimination from the tournament.

So, he watched the players, like a hawk eyeing its prey.

Zachary was in perfect shape and well-positioned—as usual, often running into free space to receive passes from his teammates. Magnus was also working hard, dealing with most of the long-range balls that threatened to find their way to Zenit's two strikers. Kendrick was even more focused, keeping a close eye on all threats to his goal.

All-in-all, the players were very attentive to the ball and focused on the game. They showed no signs of the complacency they had manifested in the second half of the group-stage match against Riga.

He was satisfied.

It seemed his gamble to expose his young players to a harsh beating against Genoa had paid off. He'd left Zachary and ?rjan on the bench for that game, to humble his team and bring them down from their high horses.

He had noticed a malignant complacency developing in the team after they'd defeated BK Frem by a score of 6:0. At that instant, he'd decided to snuff it out before it took root in his team and ended his small chance of contesting for the Riga Cup.



The best way to teach his players a lesson was to use their opponents against them. Although he'd winced at every goal Genoa had scored in that game, his players had received a timely wake-up call. They were playing much better against Zenit despite their lack of experience.

"Those aerial balls will be the death of us," Coach Bjørn Peters, his assistant, observed from beside him. "Look how our center-backs are struggling to mark those two tall Zenit strikers. They're under immense pressure."

Coach Johansen nodded without taking his eyes off the pitch. Robin Jatta, one of NF academy's center-backs, had just made a long clearance towards the centerline. Konstantin Troyanov, Zenit's defensive midfielder, pounced on the ball and made a first-time clearance without even bothering to bring it under control. He blasted it up into the air, towards the roof of the Skonto Indoor Stadium.

Coach Johansen sighed at the spectacle. The Russian team had played infuriatingly for the entire game, even earning a wave of boos from the fans in attendance. The Zenit players would not allow the ball to settle down to the ground, not even for a minute. The game had turned into a display of clearance after clearance—by the defenders and midfielders from both sides.

Aerial balls were Zenit's only tactic.

Even when they decided to attack, they still relied heavily on long-range aerial bombardment. Zenit employed the tactic, repeatedly sending long—searching passes forward to opportunistic strikers. They seemed to be waiting for a lucky break, a bounce or knock-down, close to the goal.

Such passes had extinguished the beautiful and intricate passing play style—and the coordinated counter-attacks that had become characteristic of the matches in the Riga Cup. The fans booed the Zenit players for every long clearance they made.

However, the Zenit players didn't seem to care one bit. They continued to use their long-ball strategy, keeping the NF academy attackers quiet. The game remained at a deadlock, with only five minutes of play left in the first half.

Coach Johansen was worried about how the game was progressing. If his players remained unable to let the ball settle down and play with grounded passes, they would most likely lose against Zenit.

"Zachary," he yelled to his captain—who had moved closer to the technical area to defend against a throw-in. "Move back a bit—into the defensive midfield. Play parallel to Magnus so that you can create a 'two-man' defensive midfield. When you win the ball, try to keep it on the ground for as long as possible."

Coach Johansen relaxed once he saw Zachary giving him a thumbs-up to indicate he'd received the message. There would be a gap left in the attacking midfield, but he was sure Zachary could do something to hamper Zenit's long-ball strategy. He was the most likely player to achieve the feat on the entire team.

\*FWEEEEEEE\*

Coach Johansen stopped his musings when the referee blew the whistle for Zenit's corner-kick.

"Zenit is winning a lot of corner kicks," he commented as he watched Zenit's right-winger heading towards the corner flag.

Coach Bjørn sighed. "They are very good at corner-kicks. That's how they managed to overwhelm tough teams like Tottenham in their group. They usually first frustrate the team with long balls and finish them off with corners when they get the chance."

Coach Johansen nodded in agreement. He'd already read the reports on Zenit's tactical strategies. "Yes, they're good," he said. "But we're lucky to have Zachary. He has been dealing with the majority of the corner-balls. I guess I owe our clean sheet to him, so far."

As if to prove his point, the Zenit winger raised one of his hands and whipped a teasing corner ball into the NF Academy's box. Zachary read the ball well. He out-jumped one of Zenit's forwards and headed the ball out of the box—to safety.

"His game vision is astounding," Coach Bjørn commented after the NF Academy players had averted the threat. "It's like he can predict the trajectory of the ball even before it's kicked."

\*FWEEEEEEE\*

The referee blew the halftime whistle when the score was still 0:0. Coach Johansen followed the players into the dressing room and gave them a small motivational pep-talk. He didn't change his tactics.

However, he advised his players to try their best to stay focused for the remainder of the game. He instructed them on how they could disrupt Zenit's long-ball strategy—by using short, grounded passes or counter-attacks. He gave specific instructions to Zachary as they walked back to the pitch.

"We only have to score a single goal, and we'll have all the advantage," he said to Zachary. "If we score, they'll be forced to abandon the long-ball strategy to put pressure on us. As soon as that happens, they'll play right into our hands. So, try your best to get a goal in."

Zachary nodded—without replying verbally before running onto the pitch. Coach Johansen returned to the bench to watch the second half. He felt a bit nervous as he watched his players take up their positions. He couldn't afford to lose. Not at the quarter-finals.

#### Chapter 67 - Against Zenit Цwop II

The referee blew the whistle and the second half started with Zenit's kick-off.

Zachary moved back into the defensive midfield to intercept long aerial balls from Zenit. He was itching to score. However, he had to win the ball first.

Zenit was still using their 4-4-2 formation with their two strikers leading the attack. Zachary noticed that they had promptly positioned themselves among the NF Academy center-backs when the game restarted.

A long pass from the wing came whooshing in towards the box soon after. Robin Jatta, NF academy's center back, jumped high and headed the ball back into the midfield. Zachary chased after it, struggling to get there first before Artem Simonyan, Zenit's attacking midfielder.

However, Artem was closer to the ball. He got there faster and blasted it back towards NF Academy's goal.

Lars Togstad, NF Academy's other central-defender, replied in kind, making a first-time clearance to send the ball back whence it came. For the next twenty minutes, the game was a spectacle of long balls—just like in the first half. The score remained locked at 0:0 as the clock hit the 70th minute.

The Zenit players had managed to isolate Zachary by 'simply' choosing to pass the ball above the midfield. They hardly played any short or grounded passes. Zachary was at a loss at how to get the ball onto the ground in midfield.

The opponents also defended well as a team. Markov and Sheydaev, their two strikers, did all the attacking—while the midfielders and defenders stayed back to thwart any attempts on their goal. They double-teamed or tackled NF academy players who were lucky enough to pick up a stray ball. More often than not, they won back possession instantly and sent forth long-balls to their strikers, without moving from their positions.

Zachary sighed at the genius and stupidity of the tactic. Since Zenit couldn't commit more players forward, they were not able to score. They left no exploitable gaps in their defense but also condemned themselves to remain goalless. That was unless they could manage to take advantage of a set-piece or exploit a mistake by the NF Academy defenders.

However, the NF Academy defenders were focused and in their best shape since the beginning of the tournament. Coach Johansen had committed four defenders to keep an eye on Zenit's two strikers. Zachary was sure they wouldn't make any mistake that could lead to conceding a goal.

The second half was a monotonous game of long passes that annoyed most of the fans.

The match remained 0:0 as the digital clock on the big screen slowly approached the 90th minute.

Everyone in the stadium, including the players, slowly started to believe the match would extend into extra time—or even to penalties.

However, Zachary never gave up his belief that he could still win the game. He believed there was still a chance to bag it before the final whistle.

The goddess of luck seemed to favor his patience and rewarded him with an opportunity in the 88th minute. The Zenit players had become a little bit lax after a long period of concentration and running. They started making a few mistakes.

One of Zenit's central midfielders miskicked a ball when Zachary was close enough to pounce on it. The other Zenit players hadn't anticipated their teammate losing the ball at that moment. Before they could react, Zachary was already running through them, spearing deeper into their half.

Kasongo, Paul, and ?rjan joined the lightning-swift attack, running on his left and right. They drew away some opponents from his path. He quickly advanced towards Zenit's goal, zig-zagging around the Zenit defenders.

Zachary seemed well on his way to scoring another goal with one of his signature runs.

However, Zenit was an experienced youth team. Two center-backs quickly closed him down as he bolted on the green, trying to find a way into the box. They shielded his potential paths to force him towards the sidelines.

Zachary slowed his pace slightly as the defenders approached. But when they relaxed their stances, probably thinking they had him, he accelerated instantly to circumvent them. He dashed past the two defenders on his way towards goal, his motions seamless.

However, he suddenly felt a strong tug on his shirt before he could rejoice. He tried to flick the ball to ?rjan, who had just gotten ahead of him, but the defender behind wrestled him to the ground before he could raise his foot. The tall center-back wasn't even putting any effort into disguising his foul.

In the heat of the moment, Zachary was pissed off and turned to have a face-off with him.

\*FWEEEEEEE\*

The referee blew his whistle and came to separate them.

"Cool down, cool down," the referee said to both of them, raising his hands in a placating manner. He showed a yellow card to the Zenit center-back and offered a freekick to NF Academy.

He let Zachary go with a warning.

Zachary was not satisfied by the punishment of the other player. But he held his tongue and concentrated on the freekick instead. There was no point risking a red card when there was the possibility of extra time.

The foul had occurred about forty-five yards from the Zenit goal. Zachary couldn't hit the target with a powerful shot from that distance. So, he called on the rest of his teammates to advance towards Zenit's box.

"All of you go forward and attack, except Kasongo," he yelled at his teammates. "This is our last chance."

Zachary decided to leave Kasongo back to guard against a likely Zenit counterattack. Kasongo was the only person on the team who could match his pace to some extent. Moreover, he was a short fellow and would be of little use against an aerial ball.

"Stay in the center circle," Zachary informed Kasongo as he positioned the ball on the artificial grass. "Be prepared to react to a Zenit's counterattack in case we fail to score. You can foul if you have to."

"Okay," Kasongo replied with a smile. "Good luck." He patted his back before running to the center circle.

The referee blew the whistle, signaling for Zachary to take the freekick. He'd finished organizing the wall of two players, a few meters from the ball.

Zachary raised his arm to signal his teammates to get ready. He took a deep breath to steady himself and observed the entire field of play before him. He took a few steps back and judged the distance to goal once again, deducing what sort of ball he could use against the keeper.

Nineteen players stood between him and the goalposts. Every single player on the pitch, except Kasongo and Kendrick, was ready to either attack or defend-against the freekick. Zachary's soccer brain assessed the risks and deduced the best path for the ball.

\*FWEEEEEEE\*

The referee blew the whistle once again, prompting Zachary to take the freekick.

Zachary decided to go with his gut. He blasted the ball with the inside of his boot, sending it on a curved path. It flashed past the two men forming the wall—towards Magnus, the tallest player on the field. The long-range curving pass was pin-point accurate, homing on to the number six among the ocean of players.

Magnus out-jumped everyone in his vicinity and brushed the ball with the top of his head. He guided it towards the top right corner, past Zenit's goalkeeper.

The stadium held its breath—watching, wondering whether the ball would find the back of the net.

Zachary started running towards Zenit's box while the rest of the players watched the ball that could end up deciding who would advance to the semifinal. He'd seen a shadow of the ball bounce off the top post using his Zinedine-Visual-Juju.

"BANG"

As he expected, the ball smashed off the top right corner of the goalposts. The sound of the impact was quite pronounced in the dead silent stadium.

The fans let loose a sigh, more or less in unison.

The NF Academy players struggled to chase down the ball for the rebound. However, the tall center-back, who had tackled Zachary, got there first. He cleared the ball out of the box with a well-timed back-volley.

The ball moved through midair, out of the box, with both Zenit and NF Academy players chasing after it. Kasongo, positioned in the center circle, got ready to deal with a highly possible Zenit counterattack.

However, they all paused their actions as Zachary met the ball about thirty-five yards from Zenit's goal. He worked by instinct to gauge its direction and speed before it could bounce. He caught it first-time on the volley with the top of his left boot, blasting it back from whence it had come.

The ball followed a seemingly impossible curving trajectory, first traveling to the right—then suddenly, veering left at an incredible speed, spinning back towards goal. It homed into the back of the net like a ballistic missile, unstoppable.

Zenit's goalkeeper could only look on in disbelief. Zachary had scored a screamer from thirty-five yards away using his arrow-shot.

1:0.

The cheers exploded suddenly within the stadium as fans marveled at the spectacular display. In the 90th minute, Zachary had had the last laugh, carrying his team into the semifinal.

#### Chapter 68 - Quarter-Final Results

"Are you guys going to watch the match between Stuttgart and Sturm Graz?" Paul Otterson asked, looking curiously at his flatmates.

"Of course," Zachary, Kendrick, and Kasongo replied more or less in unison. They were in the dressing room changing out of their match attire into dark blue tracksuits, having just completed their quarter-final face-off against Zenit.

"Then we'd better hurry," Paul said as he slipped his feet out of his boots. "The match will start at exactly 5:00 PM."

Kendrick sighed audibly. "I would have liked to head back to the hotel first and clean up."

"That's a bad idea," Kasongo chipped in. "There won't be any bus returning to the hotel any time soon. The coaches will also stay to watch the match. I'm sure they are expecting us to do the same and delay our return to the hotel. That's why they got us snacks right after the match." He said, pointing to the covered silver plates placed on a table in the dressing room.

Paul smiled, changing the topic of conversation. "We'll be facing one of the teams from the morning quarter-final matches. Have any of you seen their results?"



"Not yet," Zachary replied while unfastening the laces of his boots. "Coach Johansen prohibited us from looking at the other team's results before playing our match. But, I intend to go to the noticeboard and check them out before watching the Stuttgart match." He packed his jersey and walked out of the dressing room, followed by his friends.

They trudged along, carrying platefuls of snacks through the brightly lit corridors, all the way to the noticeboard area, close to the gate of the stadium.

When they arrived, Zachary started going through the freshly pinned posters on the large noticeboard. On the board's top right corner, he found the group results of the tournament.

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#### Group A

(1) Genoa FC Youth (Italy) 7 Pts

(2) NF International (Norway) 6 Pts

(3) JFC Riga (Latvia) 4 Pts

(4) BK Frem (Denmark) 0 Pts

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#### Group B

(1) Zenit cшop (Russia) 9 Pts

(2) Tottenham (England) 6 Pts

(3) Atalanta (Italy) 1 Pts

(4) AIK Stockholm (Sweden) 1 Pts

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#### Group C

(1) VfB Stuttgart (Germany) 9 Pts

(2) Skonto Academy (Latvia) 4 Pts

(3) Viimsi MRJK (Estonia) 4 Pts

(4) FC Olimpiki Tbilisi (Georgia) 0 Pts

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#### Group D

(1) ADO Den Haag (Netherlands) 7 Pts

(2) SK Sturm Graz (Austria) 6 Pts

(3) HJK Helsinki (Finland) 4 Pts

(4) Jagiellonia (Poland) 0 Pts

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Zachary let his gaze roam to the sheet pinned right below the results of the group stages. The tournament's organizers had already updated it with quarter-final results of that day.

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## Tournament Schedule and Results

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Sunday, February 19, 2012

Skonto Hall

#Quarter-final 1 - 8:00 AM

->ADO Den Haag 3:2 Skonto Academy

#Quarter-final 2 - 11:00 AM

->Genoa FC Youth 3:3 Tottenham

(Tottenham win on Penalties 4:2)

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Sunday, February 19, 2012

Skonto Hall

#Quarter-final 3 - 2:00 PM

->Zenit cшop 0:1 NF International

#Quarter-final 4 - 5:00 PM

->VfB Stuttgart -:- SK Sturm Graz

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Tuesday, February 21, 2012

Skonto Hall

#Semi-final 1 - 11:00 AM

->ADO Den Haag vs. NF International

#Semi-final 2 - 2:00 PM

->Tottenham vs. Winner QF4

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Thursday, February 23, 2012

Skonto Hall

#3rd Place Play-Off - 3:00 PM

->Loser SF1 vs. Loser SF2

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Friday, February 24, 2012

Skonto Hall

#Finals - 3:00 PM

-> Winner SF1 vs. Winner SF2

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"So, we'll be facing ADO Den Haag in the semi-final then," Paul observed from his right side. "I can't believe they managed to come this far in the competition."

"No one believed that our team would be in the semi-finals either," Kendrick chipped in, smiling. "I guess this will be a fight between underdogs."

"I wish you wouldn't call ADO Den Haag an underdog," Kasongo replied, taking his gaze away from the noticeboard. "The Dutch academies have always been among the best in the world. I wouldn't be surprised if some players from ADO Den Haag ended up in top teams as star players."

"I seriously doubt that," Paul shook his head. "If they possessed such talent, we would have heard about them already. Look at Zachary, Werner, and the other Stuttgart players, for example. We've heard a lot about their achievements even at this stage of the tournament."

"You do have a point." Kasongo nodded. "I see here that Werner is ahead of Zachary by a goal on the top scorer's list," he said, pointing to a poster on the top left corner of the noticeboard.

"He's already reached nine goals," Kendrick chipped in, sighing. "If he manages to score in today's game, he will be the undisputed favorite to take the golden boot at the end of the tournament." He added, stealing a glance at Zachary.

Zachary didn't bother to comment. He had decided not to focus on individual accolades, such as the golden boot, for the meantime. He could still earn a considerable amount of Juju-points from winning the tournament, even without scoring more goals in the remaining matches.

"I'm surprised that Tottenham managed to defeat Genoa," Paul commented. "I thought they would win for sure against the seemingly weaker Tottenham squad."

"Either way, they won on penalties," Kendrick noted, glancing back at the noticeboard. "I really would have liked to watch that match."

"We should go watch the Stuttgart match," Zachary intoned, taking his gaze off the results. "It's almost five," he added, leading the way to the stands.

Zachary and his friends made it to the stands—just before the referee blew the whistle indicating the start of play. The other NF Academy players were already in their seats since they hadn't bothered to check out the noticeboard. They feasted on snacks as they watched the players on the pitch taking their positions.

Zachary exchanged a few words with them before sinking in a seat next to Magnus. The tall defensive midfielder nodded at Zachary with a smile before returning his attention to the field.

The match turned out to be a highly intensive one. Both VfB Stuttgart and SK Sturm Graz utilized the 4-3-3 formation, mounting attack after attack, on their opponents. They both used grounded passes and

counter-attacks, making the match quite the spectacle. The fans cheered at the top of their voices from the stands as the two teams took turns attacking each other.

Zachary was surprised by the performance of SK Sturm Graz in the early stages of the match. Despite being outplayed in the opening minutes, the Austrian team took the lead through one of their strikers. He powered a shot past the Stuttgart goalkeeper in the 16th minute after the defenders failed to clear away a dangerous cross into the box.

But, the goal looked like it had poked a hornet's nest. The Stuttgart players played with more vigor, continuing to mount more pressure on Sturm Graz's defense. Shortly before the end of the first half, the referee awarded them a penalty after one of the Sturm Graz defenders handled the ball within the box.

Timo Werner, VfB Stuttgart's number-9, stepped up to score the penalty and level matters at half time.

In the second half, VfB Stuttgart started right where they had stopped. Six minutes after the break, Joshua Kimmich bagged another goal, giving them a 2:1 lead.

VfB Stuttgart's midfielders were on fire, playing Tiki-Taka style soccer. Not long after, they set up Timo Werner to score the third goal in the 60th minute.

Sturm Graz's disappointing evening ended with an own goal in the final minutes. They went on to lose to the German team four goals to one. Timo Werner had managed to bag two more goals, bringing his total tally to eleven. He was a step closer to sealing his position as the top scorer of the tournament.

"We'll need to impair the mobility of their midfield to win against them," Magnus commented from beside him right after the final whistle. "The combination of Philipp F?rster, Timo Werner, and Joshua Kimmich makes for the strongest attacking midfield in the tournament."

"That's true," Zachary replied, nodding. "Their teamwork is as good as that of a professional team. They are the strongest team on paper and main contenders for the trophy."

"The bright side is; they put little focus on their defense," Zachary continued. "If we manage to score early enough, we might be able to surprise them and possibly clinch a victory."

"Hahaha," Magnus laughed, turning to look at Zachary. "You do realize we're discussing a team we could only possibly meet in the finals. We should focus solely on the semi-finals for the moment."

"We'll be facing ADO Den Haag, a Dutch team on Tuesday," Zachary said, shaking his head. "I have a feeling we'll win that match. VfB Stuttgart, on the other hand, will be our main obstacle. So, we need to start thinking about how to beat them."

"You're that confident?" Magnus inquired, raising an eyebrow.

"I can't be a hundred percent certain about the results," Zachary replied. "But, I have to be an optimist. I'm thinking like a player on a team making a serious attempt at winning the trophy. I can already see myself playing in the final, even before the semis have begun."

#### Chapter 69 - Preparations For The Semifinal

It was Monday morning, the day before NF Academy's semifinal match with ADO Den Haag.

Zachary and his teammates woke up and had breakfast early before heading to the gym for post-match recovery exercises and massage. The academy management had fully covered the fees for their gym activities during their stay in Riga. They could enjoy the facilities of the Riga People's Fitness Gym on the days following their matches. Zachary was satisfied with the arrangement.

The squad spent an hour at the gym going through Coach Bjørn's post-match recovery routine. Zachary diligently stretched using foam rollers— a routine that involved rolling different parts of his body slowly over a tube. Coach Bjørn had said foam rolling helped reduce post-match-related soreness and muscle pain, shortening recovery time considerably.

Zachary and his teammates left the gym an hour later, feeling more relaxed after the massage session. They headed back to the hotel in a bus, chattering about their quarter-final match against Zenit. Even after an entire night, their euphoria hadn't faded. Most of them couldn't believe they'd qualified for the semis.

Thirty minutes later, they arrived at one of the conference halls in their hotel for Coach Johansen's tactical briefing. He had called the meeting to discuss strategies for the semifinal game against ADO Den Haag.



On entering the conference hall, Zachary immediately noticed a large LCD screen placed atop a table in front of the room. It appeared that, unlike in previous meetings, Coach Johansen would use video analysis to expound on tactics he intended to employ in the semifinals.

"Good morning to you all," Coach Johansen intoned in a booming voice after the squad finished taking up their seats.

"Good morning, coach," the players replied in a chorus. Explore new *novels* on [novelbin\(.\)com](http://novelbin(.)com)

Coach Johansen half-smiled. "I'm quite happy that we've made it all the way to the semifinals," he said. He was seated on the edge of a table in front of the room. "However, our work is still cut out for us. We still need to win both the semis and finals before becoming the champions." He paused, letting his gaze settle momentarily on each player in turn.

"Are we together?" He asked.

"Yes, coach," the players replied in chorus.

"That's good." Coach Johansen nodded. "Winning in football is not just about tactics. It's not just about a game plan—like the one we'll be discussing in a few minutes. What matters most is your state of mind. The focus and concentration you put in a particular game will have a marked impact on your performance."

"If our intention is winning the next two games and becoming champions, we've got to have the proper mindset," he continued, beginning to walk around the players' seats. "We have to stay focused for the entirety of these games."

"Remember, the ability to focus makes or breaks our chances of success in matches. Scientists have shown that an individual's ability to establish mental focus is one of the most important predictors of future success in life. It's the same in sports."

"The ability to focus in sports is perhaps one of the most significant drivers of success, along with hard work and talent." He paused and walked back to the front of the room before continuing.

"Mental focus can make the difference between being mediocre and being extraordinary. It helps you avoid the little mistakes that lead to losses in our matches. It helps us win matches. It's as simple as that. Are we together?"

Zachary nodded along with the rest of his teammates. His mind soaked into Coach Johansen's message. He could relate to the point about the importance of mindset and concentration in sports.

Players could only achieve true greatness when they fully-focused their attention on what they were doing at the moment. If they allowed distractions to interrupt their training or matches, their performance would suffer a great deal from it.

On the other hand, if players focused intensively on the work at hand, they would unlock their full potential, whether in training or matches. Playing with one hundred percent concentration in tournaments would significantly increase their chances of winning. Just like sun rays igniting paper when focused by a lens, the player's impact on a game would improve dramatically—if they maintained a high level of concentration.

"Maintaining focus is everything in sports," Coach Johansen continued, lowering his voice slightly. "In matches, we need to stay organized in attacks and defense, for every single minute of gameplay. We can take risks, but we still need organization behind the ball. All this requires a high level of concentration among you—the players. If you lose focus for a single minute during the game, you'll make mistakes and present our opponents with chances—as you did in the match against Riga."

"I will keep on reiterating this," Coach Johansen continued, raising a fist to emphasize his point. "For the match tomorrow, you have to play as a team, and more importantly, defend as a team. You need to stay focused and play each minute as if your life depends on it. When you lose possession and are defending, make sure to mark open spaces and opponents. When you're on the attack, make runs and ready yourselves to receive passes from teammates. Play as a cohesive unit to overpower our opponents."

He paused, turning towards Coach Bjørn. "Could you help us turn on the machines?" He asked his assistant, his voice taking on a polite tone.

Coach Bjørn nodded before busying himself with the connections and placing a disc in the DVD player.

"Coach Bjørn has been scouting the matches of our opponents," Coach Johansen continued. "I want us to start our tactical session by watching the highlights of the match between ADO Den Haag and Skonto academy." He smiled softly, turning to check whether his assistant had finished setting up the presentation.

Coach Bjørn quickly finished connecting the banana pins, and the screen came alive with a match recording playing on it.

Zachary blinked as his eyes adjusted to the screen's lighting. ADO Den Haag, in their green and yellow striped jerseys, faced-off against Skonto Academy.

Zachary fixed his attention on the screen as one of ADO Den Haag's midfielders made a swift switch from midfield to the wings— using a teasing through-pass. A winger latched on to the pass and played a one-two with a wing-back, penetrating the Skonto Academy's half. The defenders looked helpless against them. The sweeping attack ended with a cross to an ADO Den Haag striker inside the box. The number-9 planted a header past the goalkeeper—into the back of the net.

Coach Bjørn forwarded the video to another highlight of the game. A wing-back made a solo run close to the touchline, swiftly entering Skonto Academy's half. He dashed past the players so fast that they had no chance to react. He finally unleashed a spectacular cross into the box, finding the central striker once again. The ADO Den Haag number-9 pulled the trigger and scored, sending the ball to the inside of the right post.

Zachary continued watching—attentively as ADO Den Haag scored the third goal using similar tactics. He realized that the wing play of his next opponents was remarkable. Their wingers and wing-backs worked together, running with the ball to deliver crosses to the strikers.

"So, what do you think?" Coach Johansen asked after the video had finished playing.

Paul Otterson raised his arm.

"Yes." Coach Johansen pointed at him.

Paul smiled softly. "Most of their attacks are coming in from the wings," he said. "If we want to win against them in the semis, we need to seal that avenue."

"Correct," Coach Johansen said, nodding. "We have to make sure that those wings become totally useless when we face them. We have to deal with the crosses from their wings decisively. That's the only way to win against ADO Den Haag." He added in an emphatic tone.

"ADO Den Haag has some good wingers who provide crosses and clinical finishers who convert them into goals," Coach Johansen continued. "That's how they've managed to reach this stage of the tournament. We need to keep our risk minimal."

"We can only accomplish that by maintaining a high level of concentration against them tomorrow."

"I've made some changes in our formation to handle ADO Den Haag's style better," Coach Johansen intoned, moving towards the whiteboard by the screen. "We'll play with a 5-3-1-1 formation tomorrow."

"As usual, we'll play with our two wing-backs forming a defensive line along with our three center-backs." He paused to draw the formation on the board. "Our defense will remain the same as before with three center-backs: Robin, Lars, and Daniel. However, we'll use a defensive style of play based on tightly marking the opposing wingers. ?yvind and Martin, our wing-backs, will be responsible for stopping ADO Den Haag's wing attacks before they do any harm in our half."

Coach Johansen paused, turning back from the board, to look at the players before continuing. "Kasongo and Paul; you're our wingers, but you'll play as midfielders together with Magnus during the match. You'll also have to assist the wing-backs in case there are any wingers they can't deal with." He turned back to the board and drew the new positions.

"Zachary," the coach said, fixing his gaze upon him. "For this match, I want you to play behind ?rjan as both a half-striker and a half-midfielder."

Zachary nodded silently, waiting for the coach to continue.

"While reviewing our match against Zenit, I noticed that their long-ball strategy could serve us better with you on the team. You have good ball handling and control, and you're quick on your feet. You'll be

responsible for collecting the long balls and holding on to them long enough to create time for your teammates to shape up."

"I also expect you and ?rjan to keep the ADO Den Haag defenders on tenterhooks as the rest focus mostly on defense. The ADO Den Haag coaches will be wary of your runs and won't dare commit too many players forward. That's how we keep ADO Den Haag at bay." He said as he finished drawing the starting line-up on the board.

"Any questions?"

None of the players raised their hands.

"Okay," Coach Johansen intoned. "Make sure you rest and eat well today. You'll not perform at your best if you're fatigued. Let's have a good game tomorrow." He spoke in a conclusive tone.

Chapter 70 - Battle Of The Underdogs I

"Remember what we discussed yesterday," Coach Johansen said to the players in the dressing room. "Remember all your training. Remember all the hard work you've put into this over the past year." He lowered his voice slightly. Nonetheless, his words still carried to every corner of the room.

"It is the time to go forth and reap the rewards of all your efforts. It all depends on how you handle yourselves over the next 90 minutes. Remember, if you stay focused for every single moment of the game, we'll surely emerge as victors."

Coach Johansen spent a few minutes reminding the players of the game plan they'd discussed the previous day. He reminded them about the individual roles they would take on in the match before sending them off to the game.

Zachary and his teammates stepped onto the field, filled with eagerness to perform. They wished to overwhelm ADO Den Haag completely. Coach Johansen's pre-game pep talk had further inflamed their yearning to win the game and qualify for the finals.

If they could advance past the semis and win the finals, it would prove to be a rare feat amongst Norwegian academies. Winning a tournament meant fame, cash prizes, and increased chances of being picked up by professional teams from all over Europe.

Zachary, too, felt eager to perform. He finished the coin toss with the referee and ADO Den Haag's captain quickly and ran back to his half as fast as possible.

Meanwhile, the fans cheered on, drowning the stadium in thunderous applause. The commentators made some light jokes about the match that was about to begin. It felt like a festival in the Skonto Indoor Stadium, rather than a soccer match.

Zachary decided to call for an on-pitch team huddle before the start of the game. Although he didn't relish the act of bossing around his teammates, he felt he had to remind them about the coach's instructions before such an important game. Surprisingly, the squad seemed happy when he called them for the team huddle.

"Guys," he began as soon as they formed a circle on their side of the pitch. "The coach has already said everything that needs saying about the game plan and tactics. I only want to emphasize one thing. We've got to focus on the little things, the details that make a difference in such a competitive game. Those are the details we have to get right, the ones that we have to accomplish to perfection."

"We've got to carry out the roles assigned to us by the coach to the best of our ability," he added, raising his voice slightly to achieve the best effect on his teammates. "Whether defending or attacking, it's all the same. We've got to stay focused until the final whistle is blown. Everyone has to do their part." He eyed the rest of his teammates in the huddle.

"For Kendrick to do his part in the goal, Robin needs to do his part in the defense. And it's the same for every position on the field. We all depend on one another. Right?" He paused, looking at the rest.

He continued after seeing they were attentive. "Everyone has to play their part to perfection so that the next person can do theirs. That's how we'll play as a team in this game. Otherwise, we'll crumble and lose the game, even if only a single player relaxes for a single minute."

Zachary looked around and noticed that his teammates were listening raptly. They hang on to his words like they were golden or some precious elixir they'd been hunting for all their days. Some of them nodded with their eyes closed while others looked at him eagerly, waiting for him to conclude the team talk.

Zachary's tone of speech turned conclusive. "So, right now, let's get out there and play like our lives and careers depend on it. Let's stay true to who we are. Together, united as one on the pitch." He clapped his hands for emphasis. The rest of the players joined in chanting NF Academy's name in deep grating voices that were hard on the ears.

"Should we pray or something?" Kasongo asked as they were about to break up the team huddle.

"We should," Kendrick and Magnus replied, more or less in unison.

"Then, you should lead the prayer since you suggested it," Zachary intoned, pointing at Kasongo.

"Why me?" Kasongo jumped away from the huddle like he'd been stung by a wasp after Zachary singled him out.

The rest of the players laughed at his reaction.

Kasongo raised his arms in a placating gesture. "I was only suggesting a strategy to help us seal our win. They say; praying increases a team's chances of winning. Something like that. We don't have to go through with the prayer if no one wants to lead it."

Kendrick ended up leading the short prayer before the players returned to their positions for the kick-off.

Zachary moved close to the center circle since he was to play as a half-striker, just behind Brian, NF Academy's center-forward. He started observing his teammates in dark blue jerseys. They were jogging and jumping around their positions while waiting for the referee to blow his whistle. It seemed like the team huddle coupled with Coach Johansen's pep talks had had an effect on their mood. Their body language said it all. They acted like elite professionals and approached the game with the right attitude for winning. The team's morale was at a much higher level and nothing like at the beginning of most of the previous matches.

Zachary stole an occasional glance at the referee, standing near the center circle. He noticed that he was still signaling his linesmen to take their positions, in-between glances at his watch.

He then turned his attention to the ADO Den Haag players in their green and yellow striped jerseys. They, too, seemed eager to start the semifinal. He'd done some research on their squad. He instantly recognized Catalin Tira, ADO Den Haag's center-forward, who'd already scored four times in the tournament. He was standing close to the ball, ready to kick-off the game. He also recognized Ibrahim Fofane and Tyronne Ebuehi, the two players who'd caused Skonto Academy several problems on the right-wing.

Zachary sighed and turned his attention back to the referee. He hoped Kasongo and ?yvind would be able to mark the wing-duo. Otherwise, their crosses would do a great deal of harm to NF Academy.

\*FWEEEEEEE\*

The referee blew his whistle. The semifinal between NF Academy and ADO Den Haag in the Skonto Arena started at exactly 11:00 on a cold Tuesday morning.

"Zachary finally remembered to call a team huddle before a game," Coach Johansen commented, half-smiling, his eyes never leaving the pitch. "He's finally starting to act like a captain."

"He's also pointing out mistakes to his teammates," Coach Bjørn Peters observed. "That's an improvement in his leadership skills. I guess he wants to win the match more than anybody on this team."

Coach Johansen didn't reply right away. All his attention was on the game. He was trying to gauge whether his players were carrying out their assigned roles in the match. He was pleased with what he observed.

His players kicked-off the first half energetically—closing the ADO Den Haag players down whenever they lost possession. They then followed his game plan to the letter, deciding to sit back and wither ADO Den Haag's attacks. They played in a 5-3-1-1 formation and only hit back through counterattacks and long balls to Zachary and ?rjan.



He had aimed at defending with eight men behind the ball when he'd designed the game strategy. He'd wanted to seal off all the Dutch team's avenues of attacks—especially the wings. His five defenders were supposed to work with the three midfielders to close down any ADO Den Haag attackers quickly whenever they approached NF Academy's box.

Pyvind and Martin, the wing-backs, played well in the first fifteen minutes. They marked ADO Den Haag's wingers tightly, and on many occasions, blocked crosses towards the box. Thanks to their efforts, the Dutch team didn't manage any attempts at goal during the first few minutes.

Coach Johansen was satisfied with their performance.

"What a clean tackle," Coach Bjørn exclaimed from beside him. Pyvind, the right wing-back, had just made a clean sweeping tackle, winning the ball from Calvin Valise—ADO Den Haag's left-winger. The right-back then sprinted with the ball and tried to weave past opponents close to the touchline.

Coach Johansen was sure that he would lose the ball if he continued his run since Robin van der Meer, ADO Den Haag's left-back, was already closing down on him.

"Use long balls to Zachary," Coach Johansen hollered at Pyvind. "Be fast," he bellowed when he saw the right-back still taking his time on the ball.

Pyvind followed his instructions immediately. From right next to the touchline, deep in NF Academy's half, he raised his right foot and whipped a long ball towards the center circle where Zachary was waiting.

Coach Johansen relaxed when he saw Zachary chest the ball to the ground and turn, taking off towards ADO Den Haag's box. Two defenders tried to close him down immediately, but their efforts were fruitless. They'd already left him enough space to accelerate away from them and couldn't win it back. Coach Johansen was confident that few players still in academies could match Zachary's speed.

His heart was pounding like a jackhammer in his chest as he watched Zachary playing a one-two with Rjan. The boy prodigy speared deeper into ADO Den Haag's half, past the defenders in a matter of seconds.

Coach Johansen smiled, calming his bubbly emotions. He'd planned for a long, grueling match against the Dutch team, with almost no goals. However, if his team managed to score in the first few minutes of the game, it would be a relief. He would find it easy to clinch the victory.