

Greatest 81

Chapter 81 - A Game Of Tactics

In NF Academy's dressing room at half-time...

Coach Johansen could not suppress his smile as he surveyed the players seated before him. They had outdone themselves through sheer focus and discipline on the pitch. Thanks to their tenacity, they were two goals ahead of VfB Stuttgart in the Riga Cup Final.

To his delight, they had maintained the air of seriousness required for a final—even after they'd returned to the dressing room with an advantage at the half-time break. All the players silently chugged down water from bottles without chattering amongst themselves, as they'd done in previous matches.

They were seemingly well aware that being in the lead before half-time did not guarantee victory in a match. Coach Johansen nodded in satisfaction. That was the right attitude for a competitive soccer game.

Nonetheless, he still felt unsure about the game plan to adopt for the second half. He wondered whether it would be better to play it safe and restructure his team—back to the 5-4-1 defense-oriented formation. He only needed to protect his lead for the next forty-five minutes—and voila, he would win the final without any risk.

His mind worked in overdrive, weighing the pros and cons of the defensive formation. And after a few moments of consideration, he decided to stick with the 4-2-3-1 formation.

Both wingers, Kasongo and Paul, had played remarkably well under the new system. They had made multiple runs, spearing into VfB Stuttgart's half on several occasions before the break. They'd even managed to keep the opposing wing-backs on tenterhooks, rendering them ineffective on the flanks. Additionally, the two defensive midfielders in the new formation had helped free up Zachary, allowing him more freedom in the midfield. He surely couldn't change their playing style after such a remarkable performance.

He cleared his throat before addressing the players who were eagerly anticipating his half-time talk. He could see it in their eyes.

"We will maintain the 4-2-3-1 system in the second half," he began, half-smiling at his players. "I do hope you remain focused throughout the entire second-half, as you did in the first."

He paused, letting his gaze settle momentarily on each player in the room before continuing. "I can't lie to you that this second-half will be easy. I expect the VfB Stuttgart players to come at you with all they've got—right from the first minute of the second half. But, you have to play the game with courage—with conviction—with purpose. You have to be steadfast and deny them any chance of a comeback."

"Play at your best and make sure you leave with no regrets after the match. That's the only way to maintain our lead—and win the final. We're just forty-five minutes away from becoming champions. Don't squander the opportunity."

Coach Johansen continued his half-time talk for the next ten minutes. He assigned a few new roles to some of the players and answered a few questions. He then expounded on the second-half game plan to keep VfB Stuttgart at bay before sending the players back to the pitch.

In the VfB Stuttgart dressing room, the mood was more somber.

Coach Ilija Aracic didn't give his players a chance to contribute tactics this time around. Things had gone so wrong in the first half. He had no option but to change the game plan immediately.

He had to admit that treating Zachary Bemba like any other talented academy player had been a mistake on his part. He should never have agreed to the tactic of using one player to mark such a monster. The boy was already at the level of a professional in a top league. Allowing him to play in an under-18 youth tournament was 'simply' not fair to the rest of the teams.

Nonetheless, Coach Ilija Aracic had to find a way to diminish his impact on the game. Otherwise, VfB Stuttgart would end up being humiliated in a final of such a small tournament. That was 'simply' unacceptable.

"We're completely changing our tactics," he began in a somber tone while inscribing the line-up on the whiteboard. "We'll switch to a 4-4-2 diamond formation in the second half. Timo and Felix will play as

the two forwards. Joshua, Kaan, Philipp, and Adrian; you'll play as the four midfielders." He paused, turning to fix his gaze on the four players.

There was some indistinct chatter after Coach Ilija named the four midfielders. The coach had already benched Sinan Gümüs, the midfielder who had made the mistake that resulted in the second goal.

"Two of you have to keep an eye on Zachary for the remainder of the match," he emphasized, ignoring the chatter. "Don't make a mistake of leaving him alone, even for a moment. You have to stop him from doing what he wants when he gets the ball. Pull his shirt or something. But, don't allow him to run through you like you're just incorporeal. Are we clear?"

"Yes, coach," the four midfielders replied in chorus.

Coach Ilija nodded. "Our defense will stay the same. However, I expect Simon and Mwene, our two wing-backs, to make overlapping runs in the wings. Most of the time, our midfielders will be busy handling Zachary. So, the responsibility of delivering crosses to our forwards will fall most heavily on you."

Coach Ilija continued giving his pep talk, explaining the new game plan for the second half. He also singled out players who had played sub-par in the first half and pointed out their mistakes without mincing words. He concluded the half-time break by giving a short speech for motivation before sending the squad out of the dressing room. He was sure that VfB Stuttgart could easily overturn NF Academy's win if they played at their best. They had done it before, and they could do it again. It all depended on the will of the players.

Back on the pitch—

"Guys," Zachary yelled at his teammates, calling a team huddle. His focus was solely on the game—and nothing else. He was only a single step away from grabbing a sizeable amount of Juju points. He couldn't let anything get in his way. So, he decided to motivate his teammates before the second half began.

"It's now or never," he said when the others formed into a ring on their side of the pitch. "Let's play and leave with no regrets from the Riga Cup. Our main focus will be on not conceding any goal. As long as we defend well, we'll get chances to extend our lead later on in the game. Are you with me, guys?"

"Yes, captain," all the players in the circle shouted at the top of their lungs.

"Okay." Zachary nodded. "Let's go and play at our best," he added, disbanding the team huddle.

The referee and VfB Stuttgart players had already taken their positions. They seemed to be waiting for NF Academy to take theirs. The second half of the Riga Cup Finals would commence shortly.

In the stands, Emily Anderson waited anxiously for the second half to start. Around her, some people chattered on about the first half match highlights—whereas others discussed the players involved.

"I wish Riga could buy that number-8," an old man on her left intoned, sighing.

"Zachary Bemba," a young man beside him corrected.

"Yes, yes." The old chap nodded. "We should grab him before the other teams do." He sighed once again.

[Dream on.] Emily thought, shaking her head. She'd already gotten offers from five youth teams present at the tournament. All of them were noteworthy clubs like Tottenham, VfB Stuttgart, Atalanta, and others. Nonetheless, Zachary had not given them any time for even a simple introductory meeting. Yet, some of the Riga FC fans were hoping for her client to come to their club. And that was in a league rated even below the one in Norway. Emily couldn't accept that. Not on her watch.

Her only worry was that Zachary had signed a contract with Rosenborg without consulting a lawyer. She hadn't gotten a chance to review the document since Zachary had left it back in Trondheim. However, her lawyer gut was nagging her that there might be some unfavorable clause Zachary had missed. She hoped she was wrong. Otherwise, she would be taking the team to court for duping a minor.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Ricardo Andres, the commentator, drawled, breaking her out of her contemplation. "The second half for the Riga Cup finals is about to start. Mr. Vincent, what say—you about this second half? Any predictions from you?"

"I've given up on predicting this game," Vincent McManaman, the other commentator, replied. "All the NF Academy players have elevated their game to another level in this final. I'm really surprised. Kasongo and Otterson, the wingers, looked very dangerous when they attacked via the flanks. We 'simply' can't judge their performance based on previous matches. Then, there's the phenomenal player Zachary Bemba. About him, I have no words." Emily heard him sighing audibly through the loudspeakers. "Let's just wait and see," he added.

"What about your money being on VfB Stuttgart?" Ricardo Andres jested. "Have you lost faith already?"

"Well, let's leave the money issue out of the match," Vincent McManaman stammered. "The referee is about to blow his whistle. We wouldn't want to miss the opening while discussing non-issues. Right?"

Chapter 82 - A Game Of Twists And Turns

The squads of both teams had already assumed their positions on the pitch. However, the kick-off had been delayed slightly by a VfB Stuttgart substitution right after the break.

Zachary stood right outside the center-circle, studying the VfB Stuttgart line-up on the other side of the pitch. He was startled on finding out they'd changed their starting formation entirely.

Timo Werner and Felix Lohkemper had shifted inwards from the flanks. They stood on either side of the ball, on the center-spot, waiting to kick-off the second half.

The four VfB Stuttgart midfielders had arrayed themselves in a tightly knit diamond shape, compressing the space in the middle. From the way they stood on the pitch, Zachary guessed they intended to play with a 4-4-2 formation rather than the 4-3-3 system they'd used in the first half.

It seemed the VfB Stuttgart coach intended to utilize wing play and crosses to the two strikers. They had abandoned their signature playing-style which featured stable passing through midfield.

Zachary couldn't begin to predict how the change would affect the game. But he knew perfectly well that they were at a high risk of losing if they conceded even a single goal despite still holding the lead. He hoped the defenders would do their job perfectly and keep the VfB Stuttgart attackers at bay as they'd done in the first half.

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The referee finally blew his whistle. The second half of the Riga Cup final started with a VfB Stuttgart kick-off.

The attack came at NF Academy like a hurricane sweeping through a coastal village right after kick-off. Joshua Kimmich received the ball and made a first-time pass to the left-wing where Phillipp Mwene, the left-back, was waiting.

The left-back received the ball and swiftly advanced close to the touchline, heading towards NF Academy's half. Kasongo, NF Academy's right-winger, was very alert and closed him down immediately.

However, Mwene passed the ball to Kaan Akkaya, the substitute midfielder who'd come on for Sinan Gümüs at half time.

The VfB Stuttgart number-16, controlled the ball beautifully in the left midfield, skipping past Simen Gi?ver, one of NF Academy's defensive midfielders, with his first touch. He then looked up and unleashed a defense-splitting pass towards the right-wing, where Adrian Grbic, VfB Stuttgart's former center forward, was lurking. The pass soared above the NF Academy players and made its way to the right-wing, unobstructed.

Adrian, the VfB Stuttgart right-winger, chested the ball down, shoving it towards Simon Wilske, the right-back.

Simon controlled the ball mid-sprint on the right flank. He didn't use any more time to orient himself and immediately sped off towards the corner flag.

Robin Jatta, NF Academy's left-back, came to intercept him soon after. However, Simon immediately sent a teasing cross into the box before Robin could close him down.

Timo Werner, one of the two VfB Stuttgart forwards, drifted into the box like a ghost, escaping his minders skillfully. He connected with the fantastic cross and attempted to surprise the goalkeeper with a snapshot—off his right boot.

But the goddess of luck seemed to be on NF Academy's side that time around. His shot smashed off the right post and bounced towards the left-wing.

Robin Jatta, NF Academy's left-back, met the ball as it moved out of the box and cleared it away to safety.

NF Academy had narrowly survived conceding a goal only three minutes into the second half.

"Focus, boys!" yelled Coach Johansen from the sideline. "Defenders, don't let their forwards get ahead of you when the ball enters the box," he added at the top of his lungs, though the players in question seemed not to be listening.

For the next fifteen minutes, the VfB Stuttgart players intensified their bouts of attacking. Their midfield was more compacted into a diamond shape, allowing a more stable passing style and faster release of the ball to forwards and wingers. Their backline was constantly pressed-up to the centerline, ready to send the ball back into NF Academy's half.

As the game progressed, Zachary realized that VfB Stuttgart had switched to a strategy similar to that employed by ADO Den Haag in the semifinals. The midfielders fed passes to the flanks as quickly as possible. The wingers and the wing-backs sprinted next to the touchline, then dribbled a bit before delivering crosses behind the defense.

The entire VfB Stuttgart squad relentlessly applied more pressure on their opponents' defense. The NF Academy defenders and goalkeeper were constantly on tenterhooks, watching out for the crosses and runs into the box by the two VfB Stuttgart forwards. Nonetheless, they held on, denying the VfB Stuttgart forwards all chances to write their names on the score sheet.

Zachary noticed a problem with his team as the clock approached the 70th minute. The defenders had started getting frustrated after weathering VfB Stuttgart's attacks for most of the second half. A few of them began making reckless challenges, hoping to win the ball back as quickly as possible.

In the 72nd minute, Øyvind Alseth, NF Academy's right-back, tripped Adrian Grbic on the right-wing. He had committed a foul in the process of trying to stop the skipper from getting past him.

The referee blew his whistle, signaling for a freekick.

NF Academy defended against the freekick successfully.

However, that didn't end the dilemma. Tackles continued flying all over NF Academy's side of the pitch.

In the 75th minute, Robin Jatta, NF Academy's number-3, toppled another opponent, sending him tumbling to the ground on the left flank.

The referee did not show any mercy that time around. He awarded VfB Stuttgart a freekick once more and showed a yellow card to Robin.

"Boys, calm down, calm down," Coach Johansen shouted from the sidelines in an attempt to straighten out his players. However, his words fell on deaf ears.

Tempers in the final flared to unbearable levels as the final whistle grew closer.

There was no single player in the NF Academy defense who would let any opponent get past them, especially in the last quarter of an hour on the clock. They were merely doing their best to deny VfB Stuttgart chances of scoring.

The defenders continued muscling the VfB Stuttgart forwards, sometimes upending them, when they tried to penetrate the box. As a result, three more NF Academy players had received yellow cards by the 78th minute.

Things weren't looking good for Zachary's team.

He was frustrated. He had barely gotten any touches on the ball in the second half. The four VfB Stuttgart midfielders had created a pressing zone around him. They had managed to block off most passes en-route to him. Moreover, the German side had shifted their attack strategy to the wings, pushing the game action further away from him. He was playing in a desert of balls.

However, he didn't mind the status quo. As long as his team maintained its lead, he would happily accept remaining isolated. He understood that the more the midfielders concentrated on him, the lesser the damage they could do to NF Academy upfront.

His thoughts had only changed when signs of frustration began manifesting in the playing style of his teammates. They were making a lot of unnecessary tackles and were running the risk of receiving red cards. He had to do something to calm their nerves. The best way to achieve that was attacking and giving them hope that they were closer to winning the game. But he had to find a way to get away from his minders first.

In the stands, Emily watched the game keenly, catching every single second of play. As the match progressed, the tension she felt grew.

She couldn't understand why she was so deeply engrossed in the ups and downs of that match. She'd 'simply' come to watch her client play, yet she'd ended up becoming NF Academy's biggest fan.

The experience was unnerving.

Every part of her quivered with anxiety as she watched Zachary's team endure VfB Stuttgart's relentless attacks. She had never hoped more for the referee to blow the final whistle.

Emily had lost count of how many times VfB Stuttgart had come close to scoring. Crosses endlessly flew into NF Academy's box while shots occasionally smashed off the posts after failed attempts.

But what worried her most was the burgeoning number of fouls committed by the NF Academy defense. She couldn't understand why Zachary's teammates couldn't stay calm and play the same way they'd done in the first half.

Only Kendrick, the goalkeeper, had maintained his high level of performance. The rest looked sub-par. Emily was contemplating recruiting him as her second client from Norway. But, she intended to see more of his performances before making the decision.

Emily sighed, shaking her head. The annoying commentators kept yapping on about how NF Academy was most likely going to lose. They commented on every NF Academy mistake with delight, like they wished Zachary's team would lose. She didn't like their voices, one bit.

"I think the NF Academy players are finally collapsing under the pressure," she heard Andres Ricardo yell in his heavy accent. "That was a beautiful defense-splitting pass from Joshua Kimmich. But, Felix Lohkemper, the VfB Stuttgart forward, fails to score once again. Vincent! What do you think is wrong with VfB Stuttgart? We're in the 82nd minute, yet they've failed to put one past NF Academy—an underperforming team ever since the beginning of the second half!"

"Ricardo, let me correct you there," said Vincent McManaman, the second commentator. "NF Academy is not underperforming. They 'simply' can't handle the much stronger German side."

"So, why isn't VfB Stuttgart able to score?" Ricardo asked in a seemingly amused tone.

"Maybe, some bad luck on their side of things," said Vincent, his voice steady. "I really can't be sure. But if they manage to score even a single goal within the next five minutes—they can put two more past NF Academy in no time. They 'just' need to get that first goal past the defense. That's what they should focus on at the moment." He emphasized.

"Let's wait and..." Ricardo, the first commentator, paused mid-sentence. "Oh my God! What do we have here? Ayi, ya—ya—ya! Oh, my goodness me! The referee is pointing to the penalty spot. What happened?"

Emily's attention was on the pitch at that moment. A cross had come into the box from the left-wing, threatening to find Felix Lohkemper, the VfB Stuttgart forward. However, one of the defenders stepped

in and cleared the ball to safety. She couldn't understand why the referee was pointing to the penalty spot.

"And, there we have it," yelled Ricardo Andres, the commentator, solving her doubts. His tone had turned climatic. "Daniel Kvande, NF Academy's center-back, has handled the ball within the box. It is a handball within the box—and that means a penalty has been awarded to VfB Stuttgart. But what does it mean for Daniel, the young NF Academy center-back? He already has a yellow card."

Emily felt her mood sink as she listened to the commentary. [Is my client going to lose his first competitive final?] She wondered, continuing to follow the proceedings in the stadium.

"Oh, my!" Ricardo continued in a dramatic tone after a slight pause. "The referee has produced a second yellow card—and now he is picking the red card from his pocket. Oh, my! What a turn of events!" His voice rose to a crescendo. "NF Academy will have to complete the game with a man down. It's a red card in the 84th minute. Vincent, what's your take on this?"

"This is a chance for VfB Stuttgart to take the lead," Vincent McManaman, the second commentator, said coolly. "They've got so many phenomenal players in their squad. They can take advantage of this and overturn NF Academy's advantage within the next five minutes plus injury time. It seems we're set for an exciting match ending in the Riga Cup final."

Emily could only sigh as she watched the NF Academy defender trekking dejectedly off the pitch.

NF Academy was in a precarious situation.

Chapter 83 - A Tense Moment

Zachary felt anxiety flooding his system as he watched Lars trudge listlessly off the pitch. His heart pounded like it was trying to escape his body when he saw Timo Werner stepping up to take the penalty. The striker had always been clinical in his previous life. There was very little chance he would miss a spot-kick.

As he silently watched the proceedings, he felt beads of sweat trickle down his brow. His throat thickened. He couldn't complain or argue with the referee over the decision, even though he had a sound argument.

He believed the handball had been a ball-to-hand event, but there was nothing he could. The referee had already pointed to the penalty spot. He could only hope Kendrick would pull off a miracle and stop the penalty.

Zachary had never been a religious person. But at that moment, he recited a silent prayer to the Almighty (if there was one) to help NF Academy survive the penalty.

He hoped his team would still go—on to win the final despite being a man down after the red card. He wanted the victory. He needed the Juju-points.

He knew better than to try to give Kendrick, the goalkeeper, any advice on the approach to take against the penalty. That would confuse him instead. He even stayed away from the group of players crowding before NF Academy's eighteen-yard box, choosing to remain close to the middle of the field instead. At that moment, he had to trust his goalkeeper. It was the only thing he could do.

In between the goalposts, Kendrick jumped around—along his line. He was waiting for Timo Werner, the VfB Stuttgart top scorer, to take the penalty.

He didn't forget to stare down the striker. Penalty taking was always a clash of wills. However, Timo ignored his antics, choosing to glance at the referee instead.

If Kendrick had to be honest with himself, he would admit he was a bit anxious. NF Academy was going to play with a man down for the remainder of the game. Judging by the way VfB Stuttgart had played from the beginning of the second half, they would significantly increase their chances of winning if they managed to convert the penalty. Kendrick was determined to stop that from happening.

So, he smothered the tiny sliver of anxiety and focused on the ball instead.

Zachary and Paul—his brother, had already done NF Academy a big favor by scoring two goals. It was his turn to do his part and save them from conceding. That was his responsibility as a goalkeeper.

FWEEEEEEEE

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

At that moment, Kendrick had all his attention focused on the forward, trying to gauge the direction the ball would take from his kicking posture.

His knees were bent forward slightly to give himself more spring power when he dived to make the save. He had made sure to spread his arms out wide in an attempt to make himself look 'bigger' in goal.

The fans quieted down, eagerly awaiting the penalty kick.

Timo Werner finally started his short run to the ball. Without giving Kendrick much time to deliberate, he whipped the ball with the top of his right boot.

Kendrick didn't manage to gauge which direction the ball was heading from Timo's kicking posture. So, he made a snap decision to go with his gut.

As soon as Timo Werner's boot made contact with the ball, Kendrick jumped towards his left, fully committing himself to the dive. He fervently hoped the ball would come his way.

The goddess of luck seemed to have favored NF Academy that day. Kendrick smiled midair as he noticed the ball coming straight at him. He'd won the gamble, and all that remained was propelling the ball out of the pitch.

However, it had been traveling so fast that it reached him before he could push out his hands. It hit him on his folded forearms and bounced off to the left side of the eighteen-yard box.

Zachary had almost started celebrating after Kendrick made the spectacular save. However, he stopped himself when he noticed the ball had rebounded back into the field of play.

The danger had not yet passed.

Felix Lohkemper, the other VfB Stuttgart forward, came rushing in for the rebound and whipped the ball as he slid to the ground.

Kendrick rose to the occasion once again. With acrobatic flamboyance, the goalkeeper picked himself from the ground—and quickly blocked the shot.

Kasongo pounced on the resulting loose ball and kicked it away from the box. His only intention was to clear it to safety without bothering to control its direction. As a result, it went almost straight towards the edge of the box, where plenty of the VfB Stuttgart players were waiting.

Zachary winced as he watched Kimmich meet the ball around the arc of the box and unleash a missile of a shot back—towards the goal.

He was already regretting staying away from the box to defend against the penalty. To his delight, NF Academy survived once more.

Magnus, the tall defensive midfielder, sprung into the path of the shot, deflecting it away from the goal.

Since the area before the penalty box was crowded with players, several pounced on it and ended up fumbling it.

And once again, NF Academy was in luck.

Zachary sprang into action when he saw Paul Otterson finally clear the ball out of the box. The Swede had kicked it hard enough to make it soar high up in the air—heading towards the touchline.

NF Academy had finally survived a penalty.

Most of the players were under the impression the ball was heading out of play. They thought it would result in a throw-in. That would conveniently give them a much-needed break to sort out their formation after the red card. They'd even started high-fiving Kendrick to congratulate him for saving the penalty.

But not everyone on the NF Academy squad shared the same mindset.

Zachary had started running the moment Paul Otterson kicked the ball from the box. With his A+ spatial awareness, he'd only taken a moment to judge that the ball would bounce in the field of play before going over the touchline.

He was determined to get to it before that happened. So, he raced across the field, his legs moving like a boxer's fists working on a mini punching-bag.

He didn't forget to track the ball's trajectory high above him as he ran to the left-wing, like a cheetah sprinting in the wild.

His efforts paid off.

He managed to get to the ball just inside NF Academy's half as it was mid-bounce, only a few inches away from the touchline. It had almost escaped him, but he'd slid in to control it within an outstretched foot.

Without wasting any moment, he picked himself from the ground and turned quickly to face the field of play. He moved swiftly, intent on taking full advantage of his freedom before the VfB Stuttgart players closed him down.

But he was surprised to find Timo Baumgartl, the VfB Stuttgart center-back, rushing towards him. The number-5 was fast and would be upon him in only a couple of seconds.

Nonetheless, he didn't panic. He relaxed his stance and flicked the ball to his left. He made it seem he intended to run with the ball along the touchline.

And as he expected, the VfB Stuttgart center-back bought the feint. He stretched out a leg, trying to tackle the ball from Zachary's feet at that moment.

Zachary smiled as he hooked the ball with his left boot, pulling it back to himself. Without a pause, he then shoved it in between the legs of the center-back. He moved as fluidly as a fish navigating the sea.

The number-5 went down and remained seated on the ground, wondering what had happened.

Zachary didn't relax even one bit after getting past the defender. He went on a wild rampage instead.

The counterattack was on.

At that point, Zachary could have passed to Paul Otterson or Kasongo, who had joined the counter as soon as they'd seen him collect the ball on the left-wing. However, he felt like he was possessed by something that was urging him to remain in motion.

He accelerated for a while, slowed down slightly, and then madly sprinted through the few VfB Stuttgart players that had managed to make it back to defend against his lightning-fast attack.

The VfB Stuttgart goal was getting closer. Zachary raced on, almost in apnea. His lungs screamed for breath as he dashed past the final defender and came face to face with the goalkeeper.

As usual, he maintained his composure. He dug his foot under the ball and flicked it over the helpless goalkeeper.

3:0.

NF Academy had managed to extend its lead in the 87th minute, just after surviving the penalty.

The detractors were shocked.

The whole stadium exploded into a thunderstorm of cheers as Zachary found more stamina to run to the technical area to celebrate.

Chapter 84 - The Six-Minute Finale I

In the stands, Emily's eyes sparkled as she watched Zachary celebrate his goal. Her mouth drew back at the corners into a smile as she recalled the crazy lightning-fast counterattack.

Only a few minutes ago, she'd been brooding over the possibility of NF Academy losing the game after receiving a red card. But, in a matter of seconds, Zachary had gone ahead to extend NF academy's lead.

She hadn't expected the turn of events, but she was happy, nonetheless. Zachary's team was only a few moments away from winning the Riga Cup final.

"That was unexpected," she heard Ricardo Andres, one of the commentators, speak after the cheers died down.

"Yes, that was truly unexpected," Vincent McManaman, the second commentator, replied. "I'm truly speechless."

"3:0," Ricardo chipped in. "That's a score I wouldn't have expected at the start of the final. NF Academy has a huge advantage over VfB Stuttgart. Mr. Vincent, we didn't get a chance to review the penalty. What is your take on that missed opportunity?"

"Well, there was nothing wrong with Timo's technique," said Vincent, his voice flat. "He picked one side and took the penalty pretty well, giving it some elevation. On a good day, a keeper wouldn't have been able to get to it."

"I guess today isn't one of those good days," Ricardo Andres cut in.

"VfB Stuttgart has been extraordinarily unlucky today," Vincent concurred. "With the chances they've created, they should have put at least two past the keeper."

"But, some credit should go to NF Academy's goalkeeper as well," Ricardo interrupted. "He has been excellent today. The way he saved that penalty, then immediately stopped the rebound from Felix Lohkemper, the other VfB Stuttgart forward, deserves a round of applause."

"Yes," Vincent chipped in. "But, the anomaly in this tournament is still Zachary Bemba. He reacted to that ball and saved it from going out of play when it was only a few inches from the touchline. What control—what pace—what composure! He's now the joint top scorer of the tournament, tied with Timo Werner at twelve goals. This is one player already performing above the academy level."

"Let me remind you he's just seventeen," Ricardo intoned.

Emily heard Vincent sighing audibly through the loudspeakers. "That's what makes him a monster," the commentator said in a melancholy tone. "Any club that gets him will be quite lucky."

"Let's leave it at that," intoned Ricardo. "The coach of NF Academy has reacted right away. He's calling for two substitutions. Martin Lundal, a defender, is coming on in place of ?rjan B?rmark, the center-forward. On the other hand, Aleksander Foosn?s, another defender, will replace Paul Otterson, the left-winger. Mr. Vincent, what's your take on this?"

"Well, it's a good call," Vincent said coolly. "NF Academy has a three-goal lead, but they also have to play with a man down for the remaining minute, plus injury time. The coach intends to protect his advantage for those few minutes—and voila, he'll be champion. Bringing on two defenders is the right call in this situation."

Back on the pitch—

"Guys," Zachary yelled at his teammates. "We're almost there. Although we are ahead by three goals, don't lose focus. We need to defend." He clapped his hands for emphasis.

All the players had already taken their positions. They were merely waiting for the referee to blow his whistle for the resumption of play.

Zachary tingled with excitement. He felt like the trophy was just one step away. Yet, he knew very well that the match wasn't over. Together with his teammates, they still had a job to do.

They had to deny VfB Stuttgart any chances of pulling off a comeback, no matter how slim they were. That meant they had to play at their highest level of concentration for the remaining minutes.

Zachary had assumed the VfB Stuttgart players would lose all motivation after conceding the third goal. However, he was surprised to see the familiar unwavering hunger for a win in their eyes as they waited to restart the game. They hadn't given up yet. Zachary could see it in their body language.

FWEEEEEEE

The referee blew the whistle and the game restarted.

VfB Stuttgart's attack was fiercer than before. All their players seemed to have abandoned the defense and kept pressing NF Academy back into its half. Their stance ignored all protection of their goal, putting all resources into attacking.

They played with only two defenders, stationed at the half-way line. The rest poured forward to exert pressure on the ten NF Academy players. They seemed fully intent on reaping benefits from their numerical advantage.

Phillipp Mwene and Simon Wilske, the two wing-backs, had moved even further ahead. They were practically playing as wingers. The two of them caused the most trouble for Zachary and his teammates. Their frequent crosses into the box were a constant headache for the NF Academy players.

On the other hand, all the ten NF Academy players had pulled back into their own half to defend against VfB Stuttgart's relentless attacks. Even Zachary had changed positions and was playing as a defensive midfielder for the final minutes of the game.

Magnus, the tall number-6, had moved even further back to play as a center-back. The coach had allocated him the position due to his towering height. His presence in the defense helped NF Academy against the deadly VfB Stuttgart crosses.

Zachary felt more assured of NF Academy's win as the clock hit the 90th minute. However, the fourth official soured his mood when he put up a board showing six additional minutes as injury time.

Six minutes felt like ten years at that point in the game. Zachary was sure his teammates were feeling extremely exhausted. They'd been ceaselessly defending against VfB Stuttgart's attacks right from the start of the second half.

Moreover, Lar's red card had added more mental pressure on them. They would tire even faster in the last stages of the game. Notwithstanding, they all continued working hard, holding up against the endless VfB Stuttgart efforts.

In the 92nd minute, Joshua Kimmich and Philipp F?rster moved further forward and started playing as false strikers. What followed was a series of even fiercer attacks—with the German side mixing a couple of long-range shots in their goal attempts.

In the 93rd minute, Phillipp Mwene, the VfB Stuttgart left-back, received another lofted pass from Timo Baumgartl, the center-back. Like he'd done the entire match, he played a one-two with Kaan Akkaya, the attacking midfielder, advancing further into NF Academy's half along the touchline.

However, instead of crossing, Phillipp Mwene unleashed a cut-back pass towards the edge of the box. The change in attacking style caught the NF Academy players unawares since they'd been expecting a cross into the box.

Joshua Kimmich met the ball uncontested just outside the box and let lose a first-time shot at the goal.

Magnus raced forward to block the ball. However, NF Academy seemed to have used up its luck. The ball was traveling too fast. It deflected off his thigh and found its way to the back of the net.

3:1.

Joshua Kimmich had finally scored VfB Stuttgart's first goal in the 93rd minute. Kendrick didn't manage to react due to the slight deflection that had taken the ball off its original course.

Zachary sighed as he watched the VfB Stuttgart players pick up the ball from the net and carry it back to the center spot. Despite all the NF Academy's efforts, the German side had still managed to put one goal past them with a little more than two minutes remaining.

Chapter 85 - The Six-Minute Finale II

FWEEEEEEE

The referee blew the whistle, and gameplay restarted after the goal.

NF Academy kicked off the game, but the VfB Stuttgart players quickly regained possession. They then attacked even more aggressively than before. The goal seemed to have reinvigorated them, pushing them to perform at a level much higher than their peaks. They fully exploited their numerical advantage.

Phillipp Mwene, the left-winger, played even better. In the 95th minute, he dribbled past a tired Kasongo—and delivered a brilliant lofted pass into the crowded NF Academy box.

Felix Lohkemper, the VfB Stuttgart forward, out-jumped the defense inside the six-yard box and planted a header past Kendrick into the back of the net.

3:2.

VfB Stuttgart was on fire.

The NF Academy was under immense pressure.

Zachary felt helpless. The effects of the red card had started to manifest. VfB Stuttgart had almost caught up to them, thanks to that. However, he rejoiced since the sixth minutes of injury time had nearly elapsed. They 'simply' had to defend for a few seconds, and they would be champions. So, he went around, shouting at his teammates to focus on the game for that final minute.

In the stands, Emily's back muscles had already gone numb from nervous tension as she watched the final minute of the match. She'd been sure that NF Academy would win the game six minutes ago. But at that very moment, she felt like VfB Stuttgart was the team most likely to emerge as champions of the Riga Cup after the final.

"The six minutes of added time are over," she heard Ricardo Andres, the commentator, drawl in his heavily accented English. "However, the referee isn't blowing the final whistle. VfB Stuttgart is still on the attack, knocking on NF Academy's door. They are intent on getting an equalizer before the final whistle. What a match!" He sighed heavily.

"The referee is just adding in the few minutes the NF Academy players spent when restarting the gameplay after they'd conceded the two goals," Vincent McManaman chipped in. "Serves them right for trying to waste time this late in the match." To Emily, the commentator seemed a little too excited.

"Oh my!" Andres yelled excitedly. "Timo Werner, the VfB Stuttgart forward—who missed the penalty, has controlled a pass expertly inside the penalty area. He shoots. But alas, a defender has managed to block the shot. He has deflected it away from the goal. The ball is out of play. The referee first looks at his watch before awarding a corner." He was intoning words so fast as he delivered the commentary.

"Oh my goodness me! What do we have here?" Andres continued. "Odysseas, the VfB Stuttgart goalkeeper, is coming forward to participate in the corner kick. VfB Stuttgart is fully intent on scoring an equalizer in the 97th minute. They are committing their entire squad forward."

Emily felt her heart quicken as she watched every VfB Stuttgart player crowd before NF Academy's box.

[Who would emerge as victors?] She wondered.

"Guys," Zachary yelled at the rest of his teammates. "We're almost there. Only a single minute remains. Let's defend. Man-on-man. Don't leave anyone unmarked in the box. Kasongo, you mark Kimmich at the edge of the box. Magnus mark that tall center-back over there. Robin, stay with their goalkeeper. Don't

allow him even an inch of space. "yvind, mark the goal post." Words came out of his mouth at the pace of a machine gun as he tried to organize his teammates and ready them for the corner.

He' had never wished more for the final whistle in his life. He didn't want the game to extend into extra time. If that happened, VfB Stuttgart would demolish them due to their numerical advantage.

Moreover, his teammates were already tired after weathering the German side's relentless attacks for the whole second half. They had to defend against the corner kick successfully, or they would lose the final. Zachary was sure of that.

FWEEEEEEEE

Amid that chaos in the box, the referee blew his whistle, signaling Phillipp Mwene to take the corner. There was the occasional little pushing and shoving around Zachary as they waited for the ball.

Mwene, the left-back, served up a teasing lofted pass into the box. Odysseas, the VfB Stuttgart goalkeeper, timed his run perfectly to connect with the ball as he muscled Robin for aerial superiority. He managed to plant a header towards the goal from around the penalty spot.

But luckily, Kendrick, NF Academy's goalkeeper, rose to the occasion. He jumped with acrobatic flamboyance and punched the ball away from the goal, towards the outside of the box.

However, the threat from VfB Stuttgart was still at large. Joshua Kimmich met the ball at the edge of the box and unleashed a missile of a shot at goal.

But once again, luck was on NF Academy's side.

Zachary had been tracing the trajectory of the ball with his high-level spatial awareness. Without any fear, he jumped into the path of the shot and deflected it away from the box.

But he didn't relax even after the successful block. Instead, he chased after the ball as it flew mid-air. He was fully intent on getting to it before any other player. He'd noticed that the VfB Stuttgart keeper was still in NF Academy's box, trying his luck at scoring. Zachary intended to punish him for leaving his goal.

Emily let up a breath of pent-up air when Zachary blocked Kimmich's shot. But her heart quickened when she noticed Zachary trailing the ball with his incredible pace.

"Oh my!" She heard Ricardo Andres yell, his tone climatic. "NF Academy has survived the corner kick. However, it's VfB Stuttgart's turn to worry. Zachary Bemba is chasing after the ball. Odysseas Vlachodimos, the VfB Stuttgart goalkeeper, has started running back to his half. Are we about to see another swift counter from the NF Academy skipper? What a turn of events..."

Emily's skin tingled with excitement as she watched Zachary skillfully sidestep a VfB Stuttgart defender and continue after the ball. He got to it faster than any other player, just a couple of a dozen yards away from his box.

He controlled it skillfully with an outstretched foot and took a single glance at the other end of the pitch. The fans around Emily quietened as the NF Academy captain raised his foot and whipped the ball high—towards the other half of the field.

"Oh my goodness me!" Andres, the commentator, yelled at the top of his voice. "Zachary has unleashed a shot towards the VfB Stuttgart goal from deep inside his half. Odysseas, the VfB Stuttgart goalkeeper, is still racing back across the pitch. Will Zachary's long-range effort find the target? Or will Odysseas get back first? Unbelievable..." His voice had hit a crescendo.

Emily shut out the voices as she alternated between following the ball's trajectory, up in the air, and watching the VfB Stuttgart goalkeeper, on the ground, sprinting back to his goal. The few seconds felt like eons as she tried to gauge whether Zachary's effort was on target.

The ball arrived at the zenith of its flight and started its descent at an ever-increasing speed—as gravity worked on it. Without any surprise, it reached VfB Stuttgart's box before the keeper could get back.

Emily abruptly stood up from her seat as she watched the ball bounce once—twice—and then thrice before homing into the back of an empty net. GOAL.

4:2:

In the 98th minute, Zachary had managed to score yet another spectacular goal from over 80 yards away.

The crowd erupted in cheers and applause.

A triumphant smile alighted on Emily's lips. This time NF Academy had 'certainly' won the finals. There was no doubt about that.

Chapter 86 - Victors

As he celebrated with his teammates, Zachary felt waves of happiness flow through him like warm ocean waves, washing away all his fatigue. He felt refreshed—both inside and out, even though he had been running all over the field.

He savored the memory of when he'd scored the goal. The feeling blooming inside him was like a blissful evocation of that moment when he'd watched that ball soar into the back of the net from 80 yards away. He yearned for plenty more such moments.

He longed to score more match-winning goals and experience similar delight as his career progressed. He could easily get addicted to such joy. He had come to learn that without happiness, life was meaningless.

The whole team, including the bench, joined in the celebration. Zachary hugged his teammates tightly, forming a sort of chaotic team huddle, singing excitedly. They didn't care one bit about the referee—who was trying his best to get them back on the pitch. NF Academy was two goals ahead, in the 98th minute, way past the designated injury time. They had 'definitely' won the Riga Cup final.

"Guys," Kendrick shouted, trying to break his teammates out of the jubilant mood. "Let's go back and finish this. We'll celebrate after the final whistle."

Zachary came back to himself after hearing Kendrick's voice. "Guys," he also yelled when he noticed that none of his teammates was trying to break out of the huddle. "Let's go back to the pitch and play the final few seconds of the match. We have all the weekend to celebrate after this final." He added at the top of his lungs.

When his teammates heard his voice, they didn't dawdle. They instantly returned to their positions on the field, waiting for the resumption of play. However, none of them could mask their joy. They all grinned like gorillas that had found themselves in a plantation of ripe bananas.

FWEEEEEEE

The referee blew the whistle, and the gameplay restarted with a VfB Stuttgart kick-off. Felix Lohkemper, the VfB Stuttgart forward, raised his leg and kicked the ball towards the left-wing where Phillipp Mwene, the left-back, was waiting.

Zachary felt admiration for the VfB Stuttgart players as he watched their entire squad rush forward to attack once again. They hadn't given up even at the last minute. They swept towards NF Academy's half like a hurricane as if they wanted to get a goal that very second. Zachary was certain they would have scored if they had been allowed an extra minute of match time.

However—

FWEEEEEEE

The referee blew his whistle before they could reach NF Academy's box. The Riga Cup final had finally come to a close in the 99th minute.

The NF Academy players started celebrating once more.

Coach Johansen couldn't suppress a smile while watching his players celebrating their win after the final whistle. Watching the game from the sidelines had been like a ride on a roller coaster. His heart had leaped to his throat when VfB Stuttgart came close to scoring with their last corner kick. However, Zachary had gone ahead and done what he does best. He had turned the entire game around within a few seconds.

With the Riga Cup in hand, he possessed a slim chance of successfully applying for a better position at Rosenborg. He had heard that the club was about to begin a Back-to-the-Roots-Project aimed at taking back its place at the top of the league.

The management was not pleased with the club's performance after Coach Nils Eggen's departure in 2010. Rosenborg had only managed to finish third the previous season under the new head coach, Jan J?nsson. Both the chairman and sporting director were actively searching for a coach who understood the club and its players well. They wanted a manager who could work well with the current squad of locally grown talents to take the club back to the top. Coach Johansen was determined to contest for that position.

He didn't want to sit back and become manager for the reserve team the following year. He wished to be involved in the top league action instead. His goal had always been competing with the big names in the soccer industry. With a talented prodigy like Zachary, he felt he had a chance of taking Rosenborg back to the top in his first year as manager. That was if he could successfully get the job.

"Coach, you're not joining in the celebrations?" said a voice from behind him.

Coach Johansen inclined his head and noticed that Zachary had at some point sneaked behind him. "Won't you be joining the rest as well?" He retorted, patting the skipper on his shoulder.

Zachary smiled, shaking his head. "I'm taking some time to relax. But mostly, I'm hiding from those overzealous reporters. They've been chasing me all over the field ever since the game ended." He sighed.

Coach Johansen nodded. "But you'll have to get used to the press if you intend to become a pro."

"I know," Zachary intoned, nodding. "It feels so surreal to win the cup. But, I believe this victory is just the beginning for me. I hope to win more tournaments in my career."

Coach Johansen flashed him a smile. "Don't worry. We still have the SIA and the Norwegian Youth Cups in the summer. You might get the opportunity to snap up another trophy much sooner than you expect. That's if you maintain your current form."

Zachary shook his head. "I don't think I can still experience that sort of excitement against academy teams. I find facing academy players too easy. And, I'm worried I'll go into a slump if I don't get a bigger challenge. I can't wait for December to arrive so that I can join the 1st tier league."

"Don't rush things, or you'll stumble," Coach Johansen intoned, half-smiling. "You're still at the stage where you're growing fast. You can use the remaining few months to hone your skills. You won't get much time for that when you go pro."

"That's my plan," Zachary replied, his tone firm.

In the stands, Emily smiled when she received the recording of Zachary's match from her hired cameraman. The footage of Zachary's extraordinary performance in the Riga Cup final would give her plenty of bargaining power while negotiating deals.

She felt like she'd been Zachary's agent for over a year yet she had known him for only a week. When they had their first meeting in the coffee shop, they'd clicked as agent-and-client right away. She could barely believe her success at being the first to grab Zachary's signature. She was determined to do her best for her client.

When the cameraman left, she returned her attention to the pitch. The organizers had begun setting up the temporary podium. In the meantime, the NF Academy players ran around the pitch, singing, jumping, and performing weird dances—to celebrate their victory. One of the players was even somersaulting.

Emily wondered where they could have gotten that extra stamina after playing for more than 90 minutes in an intensive final. They looked very energetic despite acting like sick—tired goats only a few minutes ago—before the final whistle. If they'd showed the same stamina in the closing minutes of the match, they would have won the finals easily, without any hustle.

She strained her eyes, searching for Zachary. But she couldn't find him in the celebrating group. She let her gaze roam around the pitch, passing over the VfB Stuttgart players—who were in somber moods after losing the final. Her eyes continued scanning the field—until she saw him standing close to his coach in the dug-out.

[What is he up to when the rest of his teammates are celebrating?] She couldn't help but wonder. He seemed to be having a serious conversation with his coach—like they were preparing for another match. That was 'truly' unusual behavior right after winning a final.

Zachary continued making small talk with Coach Johansen, hiding from the reporters, until his teammates dragged him away to join the celebrations a few minutes later. He half-heartedly joined the group of jubilating players, running around the pitch to share in the joy of their victory.

However, the tournament organizers cut their celebrations short soon after. They had finally finished setting up the podium. The awards ceremony would commence right away.

A marching band played some catchy Russian or Latvian tunes as the Tottenham players, dressed in white tracksuits, came onto the pitch to receive their medals. They received their bronze medals first since they had come third in the tournament.

Without wasting much time, the VfB Stuttgart players followed suit and received silver medals. They were a sad bunch, probably still in a sour mood after losing the final only thirty minutes ago. Zachary empathized with them. He would have been in a much worse shape had he lost the final.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Zachary heard one of the commentators announce, the voice coming to him from one of the loudspeakers—that'd been set up in the pitch after the match. "Let's welcome the 2012 Under-18 Riga Cup Champions. Please put your hands together for NF Academy from Norway." The voice added, drawling in a heavy Spanish accent. It had turned dramatic towards the very end.

The stadium burst into thunderous applause as the NF Academy players marched towards the podium to receive their gold medals. Zachary and his teammates were all bursting with excitement and glee. Their grins stretched from ear to ear as they received prizes from the Riga Cup president. A jubilant mood was in the air. Even the always-somber Coach Johansen was beaming like a little girl meeting Santa.

Zachary moved on to the podium last and first received his medallion before receiving a massive 50,000 Euro mock-check from the president.

After that, it was the moment—the climax of the Riga Cup Tournament. It was finally time for the NF Academy captain to receive the championship trophy.

Zachary felt his eyes begin to moisten when he held the trophy high above his head with both his hands. That was his first tournament victory since winning an under-14 tournament way back in his past life. It meant a lot to him. It was his first proof that he was en-route to becoming a great soccer player.

But the victory wasn't for him alone. He couldn't have emerged victorious if not for the contribution of his teammates. So, he turned around and handed the trophy to Magnus, the assistant captain.

Magnus grinned and jumped around like a little kid as he raised the trophy high amid the thunderous cheers. He then descended the podium and ran off with the trophy to celebrate with the other NF Academy players.

"DING"

Zachary was about to follow but then stopped suddenly. The system interface had abruptly manifested in front of him after the familiar notification had sounded in his head.

Zachary couldn't resist the temptation to glance at the translucent blueish screen.

1 new messages

->You have played most of the matches in a highly competitive tournament with prize money at stake. The system has collected enough in-game data to grade your X-factor accordingly. Please click on the notification for more details.

[Finally.] Zachary thought, smiling. He'd waited for his X-factor stat to change from the F grade since forever. He was eager to check out how his talent would change after factoring in the X-factor.

Nonetheless, he willed the system interface to close since he was still standing amongst a crowd on the podium. He would explore the changes to the system interface back in the confines of his hotel room.

Chapter 87 - Dinner Party And Individual Prizes

The celebrations didn't just stop in the stadium. Individual prizes still had to be announced by the organizers later that evening.

So, the squad celebrated for only a few minutes before taking the bus back to their hotel. They changed into their formal wear before heading to the conference room for the post-tournament dinner party.

Zachary walked with his teammates as they followed Coach Johansen through the too-clean brightly-lit corridors of the Monika Centrum Hotel. Everyone was still in a jubilant mood. They chattered loudly about the match highlights without giving a damn about what those around them thought.

Zachary could feel a strong kinship and camaraderie with his teammates. He felt completely at home with them, having played alongside them throughout the tournament.

They walked quickly, and in no time, made it to the great hall—the designated venue for the dinner party. They were greeted with hundreds of loud conversations, all competing with the soft classical music playing in the background. The crowd consisted of players from teams that had taken part in the tournament, for the most part.

Zachary could feel most of the eyes in the crowd glued on him as he walked in with his teammates. However, he didn't panic but flashed them a polite smile as he continued to the massive table with the buffet on one side of the room.

All the players served themselves platefuls of all sorts of Latvian delicacies and headed to their allocated tables. They focused on dining, only occasionally making low indistinct chatter among themselves. They had finally calmed down to some extent after spending more than two hours celebrating their victory.

"I wish we didn't have to leave tomorrow," Paul Otterson complained from beside Zachary. "I could get used to this," he said, cutting a piece of fried salmon with his knife. He then stuffed it into his mouth and sipped on his juice.

"Don't forget we have to return to school on Monday," Kendrick commented from across the table, sighing.

"Who cares about school right now," Kasongo chipped in, frowning at Kendrick. "Don't sour our mood. We're still celebrating our victory. Thinking about books right now... Eew."

Paul Otterson laughed. "I can't believe we're the champions. It's so surreal. It seems like it's the first time NF Academy has won an international cup. I wonder whether we'll get more rewards from the academy once we get back home. Maybe, some of us will get to join the Rosenborg under-19s when we return to Trondheim."

"Guys," Kendrick whispered, leaning forward. "Did any of you get offers from some of the teams here?"

Zachary frowned, wondering where Kendrick was going with the topic. The NF Academy had an active partnership with Rosenborg to develop talents. Talk of transferring to other teams was strongly prohibited among players on scholarships. Yet, Kendrick was openly asking a related question on a table very close to the one occupied by the coaches. Zachary was perplexed.

"The coaches are just right there," Kasongo whispered back, saving Zachary from doing the same. "Can we discuss this later?"

Kendrick nodded before returning his attention to his food. They continued making small talk as they ate—until the Riga Cup tournament president arrived on the stage.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen," said Raimonds Laizāns, his voice amplified by the loudspeakers. "Welcome once again to the closing dinner party for the Riga Cup tournament. Thank you for coming." The president smiled.

"First of all, let me start by congratulating the NF Academy on winning this year's under-18 Riga Cup," he continued. "Please, let's give them a round of applause for their extraordinary performance. They have outdone themselves in this tournament."

Zachary's teammates once again grinned from ear to ear as the entire hall burst into thunderous applause.

Raimonds cleared his throat as the clapping died down. "I don't want to waste much time," he said. "Our fellow sportsmen from the NF Academy and VfB Stuttgart are already tired since they've just concluded that spectacular final. So, I'll begin announcing the individual accolades right away."

"The winners, please come forward to receive your prize when I announce your name," he added, smiling.

"I'll start with the best goalkeeper. The award goes to Kendrick Otterson from NF Academy Norway. Throughout the tournament, he put up an extraordinary performance in goal to keep his team from conceding. Kendrick Otterson, please come forward to receive your prize."

"Congrats, man," Zachary high-fived Kendrick as he got up from his seat to receive his prize. The rest of the NF Academy players followed suit, hugging him, in turn, to congratulate him on winning the accolade. Kendrick marched triumphantly towards the stage and received a shiny metallic sculpture of a glove. He didn't forget to pose for a few photographs with the president before returning to his seat.

After that, the president continued reading out the other best performers in the tournament.

The best defender award went to a player from VfB Stuttgart named Timo Baumgartl.

The best defensive-midfielder award went to Joshua Kimmich.

The best attacking-midfielder award went to Zachary Bemba.

The best forward award went to Timo Werner. He was still the striker with the most goals in the tournament even though he had missed a penalty in the finals. His tally was only one goal short of Zachary's.

The best coach award went to Boyd Johansen. He had led his team to victory in the tournament against stronger teams like VfB Stuttgart and Zenit.

The Golden Boot award went to Zachary Bemba. He was the top scorer with 13 goals, just one ahead of Timo Werner.

And finally, the president announced Zachary Bemba as the MVP of the tournament. Everyone in the conference hall rose to give him a standing ovation—as he marched onto the platform to receive the golden ball and a 10,000 Euro check from the president.

Once again, he felt how blissful it was to win—to become a champion. At that moment, he prayed he would never be anything other than a victor throughout his career. He resolved to work harder than ever to continue winning.

Zachary left the dinner party early with his prizes in hand and headed back to his hotel room. Primarily, he intended to get some sleep. Coach Johansen had already informed them they would be on an early morning flight back to Trondheim the following day.

Secondly, the system notification had rung in his head once more at the moment when he received the Golden Ball from the tournament president. Zachary couldn't resist the temptation to head back to his hotel room and check out the system rewards.

"Hope there'll be a lot of bonuses this time around," he mumbled to himself as he sat on his bed in the silent hotel room. He calmed his mind before opening the system interface.

"DING"

#2 new messages

->You have played most of the matches in a highly competitive tournament with prize money at stake. The system has collected enough in-game data to grade your X-factor accordingly. Please click on the notification for more details.

CONGRATULATIONS

->You have completed the system mission (Riga Cup Serial Challenge) successfully. Please click on the notification for more details.

Zachary smiled as he looked at the two notifications. He couldn't contain his delight since he was about to receive rewards from the system after doing his best in the tournament. He didn't dawdle and instantly selected the X-Factor notification.

"DING"

#1 new message

X-Factor attribute unlocked

USER STATS

->X-Factor (Av. Rating: B+)

Consistency Factor: A-

Luck Factor: A-

Supernormal Factor: D-

Match Winning Factor: A+

NB: Please note that the X-Factor stats are constantly varying according to your condition and match performance. But, remember that you'll never become a G.O.A.T without a high X-Factor.

Zachary was confused once more.

He could somewhat understand the consistency factor. It seemed to be something related to maintaining his playing form over a long period. However, the supernormal factor and the luck-factor were attributes he had never heard about in sports. [Did some players possess more luck than the rest? Was there a way to increase the luck factor?] He couldn't help but wonder.

Nonetheless, he first pushed his thoughts about the X-Factor to the back of his mind before opening the other system notification. He could ponder on the X-Factor more after upgrading the system.

"DING"

#5 new messages

CONGRATULATIONS

->You have completed the system mission (Riga Cup Serial Challenge) successfully.

->Mission Rewards

1) 2000 Juju-points

2) B-grade Agility Enhancing Elixir

->Mission Summary

*Milestone 1: Help your team qualify for the knockout stages of the tournament. (Completed successfully; Rating A)

*Milestone 2: Help your team win the semifinals of the tournament. (Completed successfully; Rating S)

*Milestone 3: Help your teammates win the finals and become the champions of the tournament. (Completed successfully; Rating S)

*Milestone 4: Become the top scorer in the tournament. (Completed successfully; Rating S)

*Milestone 5: Become the M.V.P of the tournament. (Completed successfully; Rating S)

Overall Mission Rating: S

Bonus Rewards

You have earned 400 Bonus Juju-points.

Chapter 88 - Second System Upgrade

Zachary's heart leaped up for joy as he perused through the mission completion notification. He had managed to earn a total of 2400 Juju-points in one go. He could finally upgrade the system. He wasted no time in navigating back to the home tab.

SOCCER G.O.A.T SYSTEM

SYSTEM LEVEL: 2 (2457/1000 Juju-points to level-up)

USER: Zachary Bemba

AGE: 17 years

TALENT ASSESSMENT: Grade-A

JUJU-POINTS: 2457

(Evaluation: A budding soccer player)

USER MENU

*USER STATS

*G.O.A.T MISSIONS

*SYSTEM SHOP (1 msg)

*SYSTEM LOTTERY

*SNOOPING TOOL

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

Zachary couldn't contain his anticipation. With the unlocking of the X-Factor stat, his talent assessment had finally broken through to the A grading. He had finally caught up to his peers like Stephen Mangala, who had gone to France.

He couldn't help but recall the moment he had realized that he'd traveled back in time about two years prior. His life had been devoid of any hope for the future whatsoever. But, with the help of the system, he had managed to elevate his skills quickly and give himself a new beginning.

Over the previous year, he had gained a deep understanding of how the system worked. It seemed its prime purpose was the improvement of a user's fitness, thereby enabling mastery of complicated skills at a rate much faster than humanly possible. Zachary had come to that conclusion after consuming the system's elixirs. They had helped him increase the rating of most of his attributes to A-grade over a scarce—period of only two years.

With the system's perks, Zachary was sure he could become one of the greatest soccer players ever—with enough work. But first things first, he had to upgrade the system.

He had finally gathered a sizeable stockpile of Juju-points. So, he didn't deliberate for long—and quickly clicked on the upgrade button, displayed in the top left corner of the translucent blue interface.

"DING"

A notification sounded right away as he lifted his right forefinger from the screen. A new message had appeared.

#SYSTEM ALERT

->The user has chosen to upgrade the system.

->1000 Juju-points will be deducted to carry out the upgrade.

->The system will shut down for eight hours during the upgrade process. The user will not be able to use any of the system functions until the eight hours elapse.

#COMMENCE UPGRADE?

*Accept *Reject

Zachary didn't waste time. He had long wanted to upgrade the system. However, a constant shortage of Juju-points had held him back. He decided to prioritize the upgrade above other things.

"Hopefully, some new functions will be added after the upgrade," he mumbled before clicking on the confirmation button.

"DING"

A new system notification sounded right away.

#SYSTEM ALERT

->The user has confirmed an immediate upgrade of the system.

->1000 Juju-points will be deducted from the user's current stock of Juju-points to carry out the upgrade.

#SYSTEM ALERT

SYSTEM UPGRADE INITIALIZING

SYNCING USER DATA

LOADING NEW PACKAGES

REBOOT PROCESS COMMENCING IN 5, 4, 1... AND 0.

When the countdown reached zero, the screen blacked out. Zachary tried to summon it—to determine whether it was still nestled somewhere within his body. However, he could no longer feel its existence. It had disappeared, leaving no trace—as if it had never existed.

Zachary didn't panic since he was already well aware it would take a total of eight hours to complete the upgrade. So, he quickly washed up and dove into his bed for the night. He had decided to check on its progress the next day and save himself from the anxiety that came from waiting.

The following morning, the entire squad woke up before 6:00 AM. They had to prepare for the return trip to Trondheim.

Zachary checked on the system but noticed it was still inaccessible. It seemed the process of upgrading was not yet complete. So, he focused his attention elsewhere.

He followed his teammates to the hotel's restaurant and had a sumptuous early breakfast. A little less than an hour later, they boarded the bus to Riga Airport.

By 8:00 AM, Zachary and his teammates had finished taking their seats in the economy class section of a Scandinavian Airlines passenger plane heading back to Trondheim.

Zachary slept throughout most of the journey and didn't bother to join the conversations between his teammates. He only woke up three hours later—as the plane touched down on the runway of the V?rnes Airport in Trondheim. Checkk new **novel chapters** at [novelbin\(.\)com](http://novelbin(.)com)

He groggily followed his companions out of the arrivals section, and, without any fanfare, he was back in the frigid February air of Trondheim city—a few minutes later.

"It feels like we've been away from Trondheim for more than a year," Paul commented, falling into step with him as they moved towards the bus. "But, in actual sense, it has only been little over a week." He sighed.

"And now, we have to go back to our old, boring lives," Kasongo chipped in, also sighing. "It's good that the coach allowed us to join the party yesterday night. Otherwise, I would have run to one of the basement parties in Moholt this weekend."

"But guys," said Kendrick from behind Zachary. "Where are the home fans that are supposed to be welcoming us? How come no one cares that we're lugging along such a huge trophy?" He inquired, patting the trophy in his hands.

Kendrick had volunteered for the role of transporting the trophy back to the academy alongside Magnus, the assistant captain. Zachary had rejected the task since he wished to get back to his apartment quickly—to check out the newly upgraded system. It had already been eight hours.

"Are you forgetting we're still nobodies here in Trondheim?" Paul Otterson chipped in, pulling his scarf tighter around his neck since the temperatures in Trondheim seemed to be much lower than those in Riga. "The people back in Riga may recognize a few of us. However, we'll never get any recognition here in Trondheim unless we join Rosenborg and win matches. Only then will we often find paparazzi and home fans lying in wait for us at the airport."

"Well said," a voice cut in. Zachary turned around and noticed that Coach Johansen had at one point arrived behind them.

"The Riga Cup is just a small tournament," the coach continued, brushing a hand through his red beard. "You can only become stars here in Trondheim after you join Rosenborg and participate in highly competitive matches." He smiled. "I hope the Riga victory won't make any of you complacent."

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

"Zachary, Kendrick, Kasongo, and Paul," the coach intoned as they continued towards the bus. "Over the past year, the four of you have made remarkable progress. Whatever you've been doing, just keep it up. Make sure you don't relax. Just remember, football careers are more like marathons, not sprints. If you don't continue working hard, you'll stumble and fall very quickly. Are we clear?"

"Yes, coach."

"I hope you understand," Coach Johansen added, nodding. "I've got great plans for you four. Don't disappoint me." His tone had turned somber.

Zachary nodded along with his friends to indicate he'd gotten the point. He'd already planned to use the remaining ten months, before turning eighteen, to improve all his attributes to the A+ grading. Only then would he be assured of performing well in the Rosenborg senior team the following season.

He understood that success at the pro-level required much more refined skills than he currently possessed. He couldn't lie to himself that he would be able to run through professional defenders using his meager attributes—as he'd done in the Riga Cup. He had to use the remainder of his time adequately so that he wouldn't embarrass himself against the pros.

"Hurry up and enter the bus," Coach Johansen yelled, breaking him out of his contemplation. "The rest of you back there," he added, pointing to Zachary's teammates at the very back. "Hurry and move it. I want to get back home as soon as possible. Don't waste my time."

The NF Academy players quickened their pace right away. They loaded their luggage and boarded the bus at their swiftest speed. And off they went, leaving the airport behind them.

Forty-five minutes later, Zachary and his three friends made it back to their flat at Moholt. The bus had dropped them close to their doorstep. They didn't have to pull their luggage across a long distance.

When they returned to the flat, Zachary quickly excused himself and locked himself in his room. He was quite eager to check on the system upgrade and use the rest of his Juju-points, plus the B-grade agility-enhancing elixir he'd earned.

Without even unpacking his luggage, he settled on his bed and summoned the familiar translucent blue screen.

"DING"

#SYSTEM ALERT

->System upgraded successfully.

LOADING NEW PACKAGES

NEW VERSION OF SOCCER G.O.A.T USER INTERFACE SUCCESSFULLY INITIALIZED

SYNCING USER DATA

Zachary kept his eyes glued to the screen, anxiously awaiting the cessation of the system alerts. He didn't have to wait long, though. Only about a minute later, the familiar system interface appeared before him once again.

Zachary was surprised when he noticed that there wasn't much change in the aesthetics of the interface. The familiar User-Menu appeared before him with a drop-down menu of User-Stats, G.O.A.T-Missions, System-Shop, System-Lottery, and the Snooping-Tool (all unlocked). He felt a bit disappointed since he'd expected some major changes.

But at that instant—

"Good morning, user," a voice sounded right in his head. "This is your system's AI speaking. Hope you're enjoying the system!"

[A System's AI! Maybe, a voice interface?] Zachary's face lit up with a grin.

****END OF VOLUME TWO: THE SOCCER ACADEMY STUDENT****

Chapter 89 - One Year Later

****VOLUME 3: THE MAESTRO OF THE TIPPELIGAEN****

Friday, March 1, 2013.

The mist danced upon the streets of Trondheim, making them appear like some magical daydream. The early morning sunlight, soft and diffuse, gave way to the first rays of the day, threatening to pierce through the dreamy ambiance.

Zachary cut across the morning chill, his Adidas sneakers kissing the pavement with a constant robotic rhythm—almost in sync with his heartbeat. He'd braved the early morning drizzle to partake in his routine six-mile outdoor run. His breath came steady, and he didn't exhibit any signs of slowing down despite having already run four miles.

He didn't mind the chilly weather one bit. He'd made sure to dress in waterproof clothing and tights that kept the raindrops and the cold away from his skin. Thanks to his ample preparations, he ran as free as a hare in the wild despite the temperature being lower than 3 degrees Celsius that morning.

In his previous life, he'd often resorted to liquor to escape his difficulties. In his new life, he had zeroed in on exercise as the most effective way to clear his mind, especially when he experienced hardship. For him, running was a dance, the way his spirit chose to weave itself into the natural world.

He had always found the peace he needed, the serenity to overcome his problems with just a little sweat. But that morning, Zachary couldn't stop himself from worrying about his contract negotiation with Rosenborg.

It had already been a little over a year since his performance in the Riga Cup finals. With flying colors, he had completed his spell at the NF Academy. After his incredible performance in Riga, he had continued playing like a superstar—going on to lead the academy to the semi-finals of the summer SIA Cup in Valencia. In that tournament, Zachary had showcased his incredible setpiece-taking skills. He'd scored twelve freekicks and managed to come out as top scorer despite his team being one of the weakest in that cup.

Despite his incredible performance, NF Academy had been eliminated by Valencia, the home club, in the semis. The failure of his team to win the highly contested cup had not dampened his mood. Instead, he'd upped his training intensity after realizing his skills were not yet adequate to help his team win a simple youth competition.

Zachary wished for his skills to eclipse any opponents in the youth competitions. So, he had focused his practice on the Ronaldinho Elastico Dribble and the Bend-it like Beckham Juju. He'd immersed himself in training the two skills like a madman, both in the system simulator and on the natural field, throughout July 2012.

Due to his intense focus and dedication, he had mastered them to beyond 100% completion before August. That had enabled him to use his new skill-set to shine in the Norwegian Cup of August 2012.

Thanks to his incredible performance, the NF Academy had managed to win the trophy for their first time in history. He had also managed to come out on top—as both top scorer and MVP in the tournament. That feat had even gained him some slight fame on some Norwegian media platforms.

Even the Tipsbladet and Mundial magazines had listed him as one of the most promising talents in Norway.

When he had turned eighteen in December, the academy had nominated him as the sole player that would join the Rosenborg senior team directly from the academy.

Zachary's heart had leaped for joy. He'd thought Rosenborg would sign him eagerly after his excellent performance in his last academy year.

However, the negotiations with the club had not proceeded as he'd expected. The club had only offered him a two-year contract, with a monthly salary of 60,000 Norwegian Kroner. That income was far below the average earnings of the Rosenborg squad.

Emily Anderson, his agent, had immediately rejected the offer, even going as far as threatening to sue the club if they attempted to exploit her client. Negotiations had broken down at that point, with neither side giving leeway to the other.

The Rosenborg side claimed to have ownership rights over Zachary as a player. On the other hand, Emily Anderson argued that the club management had coerced him to sign a bogus contract and neglected his rights as a minor. On several occasions, she had threatened to report them to the FIFA Legal & Compliance Division.

But, the Rosenborg officials didn't relent on their stand. They claimed offering a high-salary contract to a player fresh out of the academy was utterly unreasonable. They didn't budge an inch in the negotiations, choosing to continue slapping Emily's face with the written agreement that tied Zachary to Rosenborg for two years. They acted with the shamelessness that matched none.

Zachary was frustrated. It was already the beginning of March, just two weeks to the start of the Tippeligaen. However, he wasn't close to sealing a deal with Rosenborg.

The previous week, he had suggested that Emily agree to the 60,000 NOK deal. As far as he was concerned, that was more than enough money to sustain his monthly expenses in Trondheim. However, Emily had employed her incredible negotiating skills in persuading him to stay patient for a few more days. She had promised to get him a satisfactory salary contract before the start of the 2013 Tippeligaen season.

Zachary had agreed since there was no harm in waiting a few more days. He was sure the Rosenborg management would insist on their contract terms despite how hard Emily haggled. He was even already training with the first team despite the pending deal.

The club wasn't the least bit worried Zachary would run away from Norway since there weren't that many transfer windows still open in the rest of Europe. His only viable choice at that moment was playing for Rosenborg—one of the giants in Scandinavian football that had already qualified for that season's Europa League. The club had a rich history and had always been a major contender of every Tippeligaen season since the 1960s. The Rosenborg officials were sure Zachary wouldn't miss out on such a golden chance.

"Let nature take its course," Zachary mumbled to himself in between gasps for breath. "What's the use of worrying about these issues? Whatever happens, I still get to play professional football in Europe. I'm already close to achieving my dream." He balled his fists as he rounded a corner and joined the lane leading to Stj?rdalsveien, the location of his new apartment.

For the last 200 meter stretch, he upped his pace, quickly approaching the apartment structure. He grinned, feeling his mood lighten as the familiar scenery flashed by. His lungs struggled for air as he raced past a grey Bungalow. A few seconds later, he finally stopped in front of a seven-storied white and grey building.

Zachary felt a rising feeling of nausea from his stomach. He was utterly exhausted by the last sprint. It felt like his legs were empty. Nonetheless, he didn't relax. He first stretched his muscles for ten minutes before ascending the stairs to his apartment on the sixth floor.

He had moved out of his previous apartment in Moholt student village at the start of January. The academy management had 'advised' him to look for new housing after his graduation. So, he'd been left with no choice but to part with Kasongo and his other housemates. He had to live alone since he was the only one who'd made it to the Rosenborg senior team that year.

Nonetheless, he liked his new apartment and had readily signed the tenancy agreement to pay a deposit of 20,000 NOK and a monthly rent of 12,500 NOK. It comprised a large balcony with good sun conditions, just outside the kitchen—that also acted as a living room. Additionally, it had a single large bedroom, a bathroom, and a storage room. What Zachary liked the most was that it was fully furnished. It contained lavish sofas, a large bed, combi-cabinet, extra freezer, stove, dishwasher, and washing

machine. That was the reason he'd agreed to pay such high rental fees that exceeded his previous life's five months' salary in one go.

The rental costs would have been impossible for him to afford if he hadn't won the cash prizes as the MVP for the Riga and the Norwegian Cups. He had managed to amass a total of 15,000 Euros—10K from Riga and 5K from the Norway cup. He could afford to pay the rent for the whole year without feeling a pinch.

Zachary hummed Imagine Dragons' yet-to-be-released song (on top of the world) as he continued ascending the steps leading to his apartment. His mood had improved slightly after the hour of exercise. He even struck a few dance poses, spinning around and wiggling his waist as he entered the corridor leading to his front door.

"I see that you're in a good mood," a feminine voice interrupted him as he was trying out a 'sort of' break-dance routine.

Zachary jumped up in surprise since he hadn't expected anyone outside his apartment. He immediately turned around and found Emily Anderson, his agent, waiting by his door. Her deep blue eyes were observing him with a trace of amusement.

"Go on, don't mind me," Emily said, mopping a hand through her wavy dark brown hair to push it backward. "Should I try to get you an endorsement with an underwear company? You could make it big by striking such poses." She added in a serious tone.

"You're back," Zachary said, choosing to ignore her endorsement talk. He would never opt to model for companies where he had to be partially nude. What would happen if his grandma chanced upon such a picture? He was better off remaining broke rather than facing her wrath.

"Yes, I'm back," Emily replied, her face blossoming like a field of spring flowers. "And, I finally have some good news regarding your contract with the club."

"Really," Zachary closed the distance between him and the agent in a single instant. "How good a deal did you manage to get from the management?" He inquired, locking eyes with her.

The corners of her mouth curved into a soft smile. "I wouldn't say that it's the best. However, the new deal is much better than all the previous offers made by that penny-pinching lawyer. I would say a thousand times better." She emphasized.

Zachary could hardly contain his delight. He'd been worrying over the contract for two whole months. Despite his best efforts to stay patient, he had still felt restless once in a while, wondering about all the things that could go wrong with the negotiations. But finally, there was a breakthrough. Hope bloomed inside him. He couldn't wait to hear the new terms of the contract.

"Let's talk inside," he said, a Cheshire cat's grin lighting up his face.

Chapter 90 - 400,000 NOK

"Have you had any breakfast yet? Would you like something to drink?" Zachary inquired after they entered the living room.

"Yes, of course," Emily replied, settling in one of the comfy sofas by the heater. "I came here straight from the airport. I only stopped briefly to drop my luggage at the hotel but didn't get anything to eat. I'm actually quite hungry."

"Then, I'll make you some breakfast," Zachary intoned as he drew the curtains to let the morning sun into the living room. "But, I would like to take a shower before settling down to discuss business. Is that okay with you?"

"Go, ahead. I also need a few minutes to sort through my papers." Emily replied, smiling. "I really admire your dedication to your training. You even wake up to run in such weather!"

"Exercise is all about consistency," Zachary replied, nodding his head. "I have to sustain the stability of my training regimen, especially now that the start of the season is drawing closer. That's the only way I can maintain my fitness. If I miss even a single day just because of a little rain or cold, I could significantly hamper my progress."

"Why not just train indoors?" Emily asked. "The gym at Lerkendal is well fitted with treadmills and exercise bikes. You could easily stay in top shape by making use of their facilities."

Zachary sighed, shaking his head. "I'm also attempting to acclimatize my body to the cold temperatures here in Trondheim. Fun fact; the weather here remains virtually unchanged throughout March and April. I don't want my performance to take a hit from the cold during the opening matches of the season."

What he didn't mention was that he'd been running six miles daily, for the previous four months, in the cold weather to complete a system mission task. If he could finish the daily tasks of the mission, he would obtain a dosage of a B-grade mental conditioning elixir.

The elixir had a seemingly magical property of honing one's mind. If Zachary managed to consume it, his mind would become much more focused, improving his ability to solve abstruse challenges on and off the pitch. In other words, he would become more intelligent with time. That was a perk he coveted in his footballing career. His game intelligence attributes would probably soar soon after ingesting the elixir. So, he had toiled in the cold every single morning starting from the previous November to win the mission prize.

"That's a great training objective." Emily nodded, probably buying Zachary's dubious reason (adapting his body to cold weather) as his actual motive for the intensive morning training. "But, be careful while running out there. Don't hurt yourself on the slippery ground before the season even starts. We wouldn't want any delay in your debut."

Zachary smiled. "You don't need to worry about that. I've already purchased several good pairs of sneakers made specifically for running on frozen ground. I won't fall and injure myself."

He didn't continue chatting with Emily for long. He excused himself after a few minutes to take his shower and quickly cleaned up. He was eager to hear the new terms of the contract.

Twenty minutes later, he had finished preparing a quick breakfast of hot coffee, milk, fried eggs, and toasted bread. He joined his agent in the living room to start the official meeting concerning his contract.

"So, how much did they offer this time around?" Zachary inquired after taking a sip of his coffee.

Emily smiled mysteriously before raising four slender, manicured fingers.

"140,000 per month," Zachary guessed, smiling. "That's quite an improvement compared to their previous offer." The source of this content n/o/v/(el)bi((n))

Emily shook her head, maintaining a light smile. "Four hundred thousand per month. Not fourteen thousand." She emphasized.

"Four hundred thousand!" Zachary exclaimed. It took a second or two for the information to sink through his skull. "Four hundred thousand!" He mumbled once again, his eyes widening.

"Were all the Rosenberg officials kicked in the head by some donkeys?" He asked, pivoting his gaze to Emily, his expression a mixture of shock, disbelief, and sheer incredulity. "How did you manage to negotiate such a lucrative deal?"

Emily smiled mysteriously. "I bypassed both the sporting director and the legal representatives to get the offer. I 'simply' approached the club chairman himself and showed him videos of your past performances. He was instantly struck by your talent and took a liking to your style of play. He immediately ordered the legal department to draft a new contract with a monthly salary of that amount."

"Really?" Zachary inquired.

"Yes, really," she replied. "I didn't do anything other than showing the chairman videos taken at your games. Maybe, I might have mentioned that Valencia was looking forward to gaining your services. That's all."

[How could negotiating a deal be that simple?] He could easily tell that Emily had probably used a few other unique approaches. But he didn't try to probe about the whole negotiation process since he trusted her to do the best for him.

Emily fished a couple of folders from her enormous handbag. "Here is a copy of the new contract," she said, removing a set of papers from the folder and handing them to Zachary. "Just read through and see whether the new terms are agreeable to you."

"Anything I need to look out for in particular?" Zachary inquired after receiving the papers. He flipped to the last page and noticed that the contract had a total of 48 pages. He couldn't read through the entire document in only a few minutes.

"You can focus on the Rights and Obligations of Parties section first," Emily replied. "That'll give you an idea of the duties you need to fulfill while under contract. You should also read the Remuneration section to understand your income for the next two years—that's if you agree to sign the contract."

"Please note that in addition to the 400,000 NOK monthly income, you'll earn medical insurance, housing allowance, and a few other additional payments." She added in-between sips of her coffee. "You'll also get match-winning bonuses—depending on your performance during the season. If you're able to score goals in every match, you could rake in a total of 500,000 NOK from the bonuses alone per month."

"That much!" Zachary looked at her agent, his eyes widening in disbelief. 500,000 NOK was the equivalent of more than 110 million Congolese Francs. If he earned such bonuses for ten months, he could turn into an investor on his return to the DRC, his home country. He could construct apartments, securing himself a steady income for the rest of his life.

"Ivar Koteng, the club chairman, accepted such a deal?" Zachary probed once again, eyeing his agent with doubt. A deal with such benefits seemed too good to be true. He couldn't help but wonder what Emily had done to force such a deal out of the chairman.

Emily smiled mysteriously. "If you hadn't signed that contract that tied you to the club for two years, I could have negotiated for a better bargain. But that ship has already sailed. If I try to sue the club, I'll also harm you in the process, hindering your career's progress. This offer is the best I could manage."

Zachary nodded before busying himself with the document. For the next hour, he read through the sections of the contract that mattered the most. Whenever he had trouble understanding a clause, Emily would expound on it, quickening his reading pace.

"So, what is your take on the contract?" Emily asked once Zachary finished reading through the whole document. "If you find the terms of the contract satisfactory, we need to finalize the signing quickly. We don't want the situation to change while we're dilly-dallying."

"Of course, I find it very agreeable," Zachary replied, lips stretching wider into a grin. "This is a much better contract than I anticipated. If we can, we should sign it today." He emphasized, locking gazes with Emily.

"That's great." Emily nodded. "I'll call Mr. Malvik right away to schedule an appointment," she added, fishing her phone from her handbag.

She spent the next few minutes on her phone, arranging the meeting with the club management. Zachary didn't try to listen in on the conversation, choosing to trust his agent with the contract issues. He busied himself by gulping down breakfast until Emily finished talking on the phone.

"Mr. Malvik says we can come to the club offices at 11:00 this morning," she said, shoving her phone back into her bag. "It seems the chairman has ordered him to finalize the deal as quickly as possible."

Zachary cast a glance at his wall clock and noticed that it had just turned 9:00 AM. They still had about two hours to the scheduled meeting time. However, they needed thirty minutes to travel, by bus, to Brakka. That was where the club's head offices were located. "We can set off at 10:00 AM if that's okay with you." He intoned, locking eyes with Emily.

"That's fine," Emily replied.