

## Greatest 91

### Chapter 91 - The Concerns Of The Club Management

Concurrently in one of the conference rooms at Rosenborg's Head Office at Brakka—

A Rosenborg Club management meeting was taking place to finalize the terms of Zachary's contract.

Boyd Johansen, the newly appointed head coach of the Rosenborg senior team, sat on the left side of Ivar Koteng, the club chairman. A half-smile outlined his face as he listened to Mr. Daniel Malvik, the club's chief legal advisor, laying out his arguments. Mr. Malvik was attempting to dissuade the management and board members from approving Zachary's high-salary contract.

"We're taking a huge risk by offering a player fresh out of the academy that kind of money," Mr. Malvik said, his tone matter-of-factly. "I'm aware that he has been performing well—but that doesn't guarantee he'll continue playing at the same level when he joins the senior team. We could end up incurring a sizeable loss if we go ahead with this deal."

"Such arguments are baseless," Ivar Koteng, the club chairman, cut in, his tone dismissive. "I've already watched the video performances of Zachary during the Riga, SIA, and Norway Youth Cups. I can say this with a hundred percent confidence. Zachary's level is far above the average player in the Tippeligaen. What do you think, Coach Johansen?" The chairman asked, casting a glance towards him.

Coach Johansen cleared his throat before answering. "I've been coaching Zachary since he arrived here in Trondheim. I support the chairman's decision. In just two years, he has refined his skills to become one of the most promising young players in all of Europe. The boy has boundless potential. He's one of the few players with the capability to claim a place among the greats."

"Those of you who aren't convinced should watch his match videos from the SIA or Riga Cups. He faced off against some of the best youth teams in Europe." Coach Johansen smiled softly, letting his gaze roam across the other executives on the table. "Zachary always managed to maintain his composure and scored even when the rest of his teammates underperformed."

"I have the utmost confidence that he'll continue growing even after joining the senior team. If I had been—tasked with drafting the contract, I would have offered him more money to motivate him more during his time at the club." He added in a serious tone.

"I'm not trying to argue that Zachary lacks talent," Mr. Malvik chipped in, shaking his head. "My main concern is about the contract terms. Although the new deal firmly tethers him to the club for the next two years, it also commits us to keep him in the squad—whether he performs or not. If the latter happens, and we want him out of the starting roster, we would have to pay an excessive amount of penalty fees."

The chief legal advisor locked gazes with Coach Johansen before continuing. "Coach, you must have received the results of Zachary's medical. You should have noticed a few points of concern in his report."

"Is there a problem with Zachary's fitness?" The club chairman cut in, frowning.

"No, not at all," Mr. Malvik hurriedly corrected, waving an arm for emphasis. "There're no issues with his fitness. In fact, he's one of the fittest youth players that I have ever come across."

"Then what's the problem?" The chairman probed, casting a cursory glance towards Coach Johansen.

"There is only one concern regarding Zachary," Coach Johansen cut in, so-as-to make things clear. "He seems to have entered a late growth spurt over the past few months. In just six months, Zachary has grown a couple of inches. He should be 6, 4 feet at the moment. We're not yet sure if he'll continue growing." the coach explained.

"But, I can assure you this growth spurt will not affect Zachary's performance when he joins the senior team," he continued. "We'll tailor him special training routines to help him acclimatize to his growing physique. You have my word on this." He added ardently.

"If I may make the issue clear, Mr. Chairman," Mr. Malvik cut in, straightening his black neck-tie. "Although I'm not a fitness coach, I'm aware that such a growth spurt is the worst nightmare for young players entering the professional stage. Let me give an example."

"In 2007, the Italian giants AC Milan signed Alexandre Pato from Internacional at €24 million. Pato was one of the most promising talents from Brazil that year. During his first game against Napoli, he scored a superb goal. Everyone was—convinced that he would have a brilliant career. Like our Zachary, he was fast, skilled, precise, and one of the most clinical young players. He seemed to have the potential to win at least one Ballon d'Or in the course of his career."

"However, only six months after his debut at AC Millan, everything started going wrong," Mr. Malvik lowered his voice for emphasis. Nonetheless, it still carried to everyone in the room.

"A few factors led to his marked decrease in form. Arguably, he wasn't up to the challenge in the top league. Or maybe the temptations nurtured by earning loads of money, much higher than his previous income, lowered his focus."

"However, what negatively affected him the most was his late growth spurt which messed up his running and dribbling posture. Mr. Johansen, as a coach, should understand this issue better than I."

"As a result, he started getting injured all the time due to his messed up dribbling and running posture. That was the true beginning of his decline."

"I'm not saying that the growth spurt is the only thing that could affect Zachary," the chief legal advisor added. "There're many other things that could go wrong and affect his performance. Maybe, a bad girlfriend, an unknown sickness, etc. We shouldn't offer him such a lucrative contract before observing his performance and attitude at the professional level. That's all I have to say."

Ivar Koteng, the chairman, nodded. "I understand your worries, Mr. Malvik. However, any investment is often a risk. You may buy real estate only for an earthquake to ravage your property the next day. You may purchase shares of a listed company, but the next month, it goes bankrupt."

The chairman locked gazes with Mr. Malvik and added. "I believe that Zachary Bemba is a worthwhile investment. Moreover, we haven't paid much in the grand scheme of things to acquire his services. Just imagine if we were to buy a player of his class from another academy. How much would we have had to pay? I would say probably a lot." He laughed, shaking his head. "Isn't that right, Coach Johansen?"

"Yes, chairman," Coach Johansen replied, nodding. "A player of his caliber is valued at around 20 - 25 million Euros in the current transfer market. We're lucky to pick him up for free."

All the nine executives in the conference room, except Mr. Malvik, laughed at that.

"Anyways," the chairman chipped in, leaning back in his chair. "I'm of the view that we maintain the current terms of Zachary's contract." He paused, casting a glance towards the legal advisor. "Mr. Malvik,

I'm aware of the legal implications of this deal. However, I'm willing to take a gamble on Zachary's talent in this case. If he performs, we will have made a big profit. If he doesn't, we will count this as another small loss for the club. No need to worry too much about it. Okay?"

"Yes, chairman," Mr. Malvik replied.

"Great," the chairman nodded, grinning. "Let's prepare for the signing ceremony. Zachary and his agent should be coming here in about an hour. Since he's a locally grown talent—straight out of the academy, we should do our best to welcome him to the senior team."

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## Chapter 92 - The New Contract

Zachary and Emily arrived at Rosenberg's head office, located in Brakka, a German-built barracks dating from World War II, at fifteen minutes to eleven that morning.

"I wonder why they couldn't just put their offices at Lerkendal!" Emily commented as they stood before the antique-styled white wooden building with the name 'ROSENBORG BALLKLUB' inscribed above its door.

"Beats me," Zachary replied, his shoulder raising in a casual shrug. "Maybe they just wanted offices that would set them apart from the rest of the clubs. We should head inside. It's about time the meeting started."

"Okay." Emily nodded before leading the way into the building.

Zachary followed her through a brightly lit corridor, past framed photographs of former Rosenberg players.

They trekked past a few cabinets with trophies, a couple of closed doors—probably leading to some of the Rosenberg offices. In less than a minute, they arrived at their destination. They stood before another set of closed doors—carved from rich, mellow wood embellished with artistic patterns.

There Emily paused, straightening her attire briefly. She had donned what seemed to be a new suit to the meeting. There wasn't a single discernible crease visible on it. However, Emily still seemed worried about the attire. Her behavior amused Zachary.

"Be sharp," she intoned, turning around to observe him. "Just be yourself in there. I'll be responsible for the contract negotiations and anything else that comes up. You're free to ask for a private chat with me—in case you don't understand any of the contents of the final contract. But don't openly interrupt my dialogue with their representative. Are we clear?" Her tone had turned solemn.

"Okay." Zachary nodded.

"Then let's head in." She smiled.

Emily turned around and rapped on the double doors. Having knocked, she didn't wait for a reply, or at least Zachary never heard one. She pushed the door open, stepping into the room, flooding with low chatter in the Norwegian language.

Zachary did not dawdle but stepped inside after her. Coach Johansen, Mr. Malvik, and two other Rosenborg executives were—waiting for them in what appeared to be a dining room.

"Good morning, Zachary," Coach Johansen intoned, extending his hand for a greeting. "Hope your day is going well!" He smiled, brushing two of his left-hand fingers through his red beard.

"Good morning, coach," Zachary replied, stepping forward and taking the extended hand in a firm grip. "Thank you for hosting us today," he added, smiling softly.

"No need to thank us," the coach intoned, waving an arm before him in a dismissive gesture. "That's what we should do," he added before pivoting his gaze on Emily, who was standing quietly beside Zachary. "And this here must be Miss Emily Anderson, your agent. Right?"

Emily stepped forward, offering a hand for a greeting. "Yes, Coach. I am Emily Anderson. It's a pleasure to meet you."

Coach Johansen returned her handshake, half-smiling. "Oh, thanks for taking care of Zachary. I hear you have been giving both our financial and legal departments hell while negotiating Zachary's deal. But, I'm glad that we have finally come to an agreement."

Emily nodded but remained silent. She seemed unwilling to comment on the negotiating process.

Coach Johansen was about to continue, but a light cough interrupted his monologue.

"Oh, sorry," the coach intoned, stepping to the side. "I forgot to introduce you to the Chairman and the sporting director of Rosenborg," he added, a rueful smile outlining his face.

"Coach Johansen," intoned one of the executives behind him. "I can very well introduce myself." He laughed heartily, stepping forward to take Zachary's hand. "Young man, I'm Ivar Koteng, the club chairman. Let me take this opportunity to welcome you to Rosenborg."

"Good morning, chairman." Zachary returned the handshake, bowing slightly at the waist. He had heard that the Rosenborg Chairman was one of the most influential men in Trondheim. But what Zachary liked most about him was his love for the football game. "It's a pleasure to meet you. Thank you for giving me a chance to play for the Troll Kids."

The chairman was a huge fellow, his chest bulging through his t-shirt above a slight potbelly. His head had long started balding. He carried himself with an air of authority, amplified by his sharp eyes.

He stepped back, observing Zachary for a few moments. "Hahaha," he then burst into laughter, nodding to himself as if he'd discovered something interesting. "I see why Coach Johansen was eager to have you as part of your squad. You're—destined to be a great player.

[Does this chairman think that he can see through someone's talent with just a glance?] Zachary could not help but wonder. He had just given him one look over and determined he would be a great player. That was strange since even the most astute coaches couldn't discern talent with a mere glance. They had to observe a player with the ball first—before they could judge his skills.

"Miss Emily Anderson, we meet again," the chairman grinned, turning towards her. "I'm glad that we have finally come to an understanding."

"Good morning, chairman," Emily nodded, smiling. "Thank you for having us. I hope your morning was a wonderful one!"

The chairman beamed. "Before you arrived, it was still rather slow. But, since you've brought us our star, I can finally relax. Let's take our seats and begin the meeting right away. I've got a few more appointments later today."

The chairman didn't even allow Zachary the chance to greet the other executives. He held on to Zachary's hand and led him to a nearby table. It seemed he was worried Zachary would escape and run away before signing the contract.

"Well, Miss Emily Anderson," Mr. Daniel Malvik, Rosenberg's chief legal advisor, intoned, taking on a formal tone. All the parties present had just finished another round of introductions after taking their seats around the rectangular table. "Have you and your client read and understood all the terms of the contract? Does your client find the terms agreeable?" He asked, leaning forward to lock gazes with Emily.

Emily smiled with confidence. "We have finished reviewing the 'draft' of the contract." She emphasized the word—draft. "Most of the clauses are agreeable to my client," she said, opening the folder before her. She then withdrew a set of papers, probably a copy of the contract draft, before continuing. "However, there are still three clauses that we would propose to revise. These clauses are the Appearance, the Buy-Out, and Release clauses."

Zachary struggled to prevent himself from frowning on hearing Emily's statement. They had already discussed all the terms of the contract, including the three clauses. Zachary was satisfied with the deal. However, he was perplexed at his agent's insistence on haggling at the final stage of the negotiation.

The Appearance clause stipulated that Zachary had to play a total of 75 minutes in a game to receive the match participation bonus. The Buy-Out clause tied Zachary to Rosenberg—unless another club (not in the Norwegian league) could offer 24 million Euros during an active transfer window. Rosenberg would only allow Zachary to negotiate with another club after receiving such an offer. Additionally, there was a release clause in Zachary's contract. If any club ever made an offer of 50 million Euros, they would trigger the clause and free Zachary from Rosenberg, winning his services in the process.

#### Chapter 93 - Finalizing The Deal And Jersey Number

"Miss Emily," Mr. Malvik intoned, frowning. "We already discussed the terms. Why are we going back to negotiations at this moment?" He leaned back into his chair, not bothering to mask his displeasure. The situation on the table turned gloomy as the rest of the executives glared at Emily.

Emily smiled, seemingly not bothered by the annoyance of the rest. "Mr. Malvik. If I remember correctly, we had only agreed that Zachary would gain an appearance bonus every time he was on the starting lineup. However, in the contract, you have added a clause that denies Zachary this bonus unless he plays a total of 75 minutes in a game. That isn't fair to a young player like my client." She added, her tone somber.

"Moving on, the Buy-Out and Release clauses are highly-priced. Fifty million as the release-fee is too much for an eighteen-year-old player. Do you want to use this fee to tie my client to your club for the next eight years until he can attract such a fee?"

Mr. Malvik smiled softly, straightening his tie. "Miss Emily, for the past few months, you have been arguing that your client is one of the most talented footballers in Norway."

"You specifically said that we should treat your client as a mature player since he'll readily adapt to the tempo of the senior team. That was the sole reason we offered a salary around the mid-tier range of the Rosenborg first-team player earnings. Miss Emily, now that you have achieved a good salary deal for your client, why are you playing the young-player card? Aren't you the very same person that insisted we don't treat Zachary as an inexperienced young player?"

Emily was about to reply, but Mr. Malvik held up his hand, gesturing that he hadn't finished his argument. He flipped through the papers in front of him before continuing.

"We have even added a wage increase clause to encourage your client to perform to the best of his abilities this season. If he scores fifteen goals in a season or provides 20 assists, he'll get a monthly salary increment of 100,000 NOK. If he manages to net thirty goals, he will get an increment of 300,000 NOK. These clauses will all be effective in the next month right after he has attained the stipulated achievements."

"That means your client might be earning 800,000 NOK by the end of the season. That is excluding the match-appearance bonuses and other allowances. Miss Emily, why would you even try to amend the clauses for such a contract? Is it just because of the Buy-Out and the Release clauses? I'm sorry to say—but we'll scrap the deal if you make such a proposition." He concluded, his body language emphasizing that he didn't want to hear Emily's nonsense.



On hearing the legal advisor's words, Zachary felt his heart sink. He wished to finalize the deal so that he would concentrate on playing for Rosenberg.

Zachary didn't understand why Emily was still bargaining at the last minute. Nonetheless, he didn't voice his displeasure. He had promised Emily he wouldn't interrupt her during the negotiations with the club management.

For the next few minutes, Emily exchanged arguments with Mr. Malvik, neither party giving any leeway to the other during the negotiation. Emily insisted that Rosenberg should cut in half the fees required to trigger the Buy-Out and Release clauses. She also emphasized that Zachary be—counted as having made an appearance as long as he appeared on the team. However, Mr. Malvik turned a deaf ear to all her pleas.

Zachary and the rest of the executives watched silently as the two lawyers battled with words that didn't make sense to the rest of them. If they'd been—left to their own devices, they might have argued until the following day.

But, luckily, the chairman held up his hand to cut short their heated verbal exchange after a few minutes. "Miss Emily," he smiled, facing her. "I want to make this brief since I have to attend another meeting in about an hour. I'll take a step back and agree to the amendment of the Appearance clause."

"Chairman!" Mr. Malvik called out, nearly jumping from his seat.

Mr. Koteng held up his hand for silence. "We'll count that Zachary has made an appearance as long as he is on the starting eleven or the substitutes for the match day. However, the Buy-Out and Release clause will stay the same. That's my last offer. What say you, Miss Emily?" His deep voice resounded across the room, his tone somber.

Emily frowned, turning to cast a glance at Zachary. The latter 'simply' nodded, indicating that she should take the deal. If it was him, he wouldn't have bothered to negotiate for more clauses. He would have already signed the contract thirty minutes ago.

"Okay, deal," Emily intoned, standing and extending a hand to the chairman.

"Great." The chairman grinned, taking her hand. "You have given us a hard time during these negotiations."

Emily smiled sheepishly at that. "I'm only trying to do my best for my client. The good contract terms will boost Zachary's morale, allowing him to perform beyond his limits. Surely, you can't blame me for that."

"Well, you do have a point." The chairman nodded before turning towards Zachary.

"Once again, I welcome you to the Rosenborg team," he said, patting Zachary's shoulder. "But please remember to continue doing your best to improve your skills. Only then will you stay in top shape and perform at the height of your abilities."

"Yes, chairman," Zachary replied, patting his chest. "I'll continue doing my best both on and off the pitch. You have my word."

The chairman grinned at him. "That's great. I do have high hopes for you. You can finalize the rest with Coach Johansen and Mr. Erik Hoftun. You still have to select your shirt number."

Zachary continued making small talk with the executives while Mr. Malvik and Emily amended and finalized the new contract document. He got to meet the sporting director, who was a bearded fellow named Erik Hoftun. He seemed eager to initiate Zachary into the senior team that-very-day, even going—forward to inquire about his choice of jersey number.

Zachary didn't deliberate for long and requested the sporting director to—assign him the number-33 only after a moment. He wanted a unique number—that had never been worn by any famous football star in history. Moreover, the number-33 corresponded to his date of birth which was 3rd December.

When Zachary finished selecting his jersey number, he felt like a heavyweight had been—lifted from his shoulders. A light smile lit up his face as he watched Emily and Mr. Malvik editing the new contract on one of their laptops. In just a few minutes, he would become an official Rosenborg player. He had finally achieved his previous life's dream of playing professional football in Europe. He couldn't contain his delight.

Chapter 94 - Lerkendal Stadion

Zachary's signing ceremony proceeded without much fanfare. There were no journalists present when he put his signature down on the final contract. The only people present to witness his signing by the senior team were the four Rosenborg executives and a single photographer. However, he wasn't disappointed in the slightest. Despite not attracting a crowd for his first professional signing ceremony, he still felt happy to confirm his employment with the top Norwegian club.

Zachary and Emily left Brakka with Coach Johansen in his car immediately after the conclusion of the ceremony. They were—accompanied by Mr. Erik Hoftun, the sporting director of Rosenborg.

They set a course for Lerkendal Stadion to complete the procedures involved in Zachary's initiation to the senior team. He was yet to select a locker, take a tour of the stadium, and meet with the Rosenborg officials in charge of publicity.

"Zachary," intoned Coach Johansen as he navigated a roundabout and steered his Ford Ranger into the street leading to the gates of Lerkendal Stadion. "I suggest you take a few days off after completing the procedures today. You should go home and do whatever you have to do today. Make sure everything in your life is in order. Then, rejoin the team for the training session on Monday at 9:00 AM."

"I might as well continue training with the team today," Zachary replied, smiling. He had made himself comfortable beside Emily in the back seat of Coach Johansen's car.

"Young man," Mr. Erik Hoftun, the sporting director seated in the front passenger seat, chipped in. "I advise you to take Coach Johansen's advice. It's a good idea to take this weekend off and relax your body and mental state. The training will feel like hell starting this Monday since we'll be commencing serious preparations for the new season. The sessions won't be anything like the half-assed regimens you had grown used to in the academy."

"Yes, director," Zachary replied half-heartedly. He was reluctant to take the weekend off since he intended to acquire a starting position on the team as quickly as possible. Missing the next two days of first-team training would lessen his chances considerably. Nonetheless, he decided to respect the coach's advice and stay at home for the weekend. He had been waiting three months to finalize the contract with Rosenborg. He could afford to wait two more days.

"That's great," Coach Johansen said without taking his eyes off the road. "I've been your coach for the past two years. All I can say is you're one of the most focused young players that I've ever trained. Your work ethic is commendable." He paused, stepping on the brakes as he neared a zebra-crossing.

"Thank you for your praise," Zachary replied, nodding slightly.

"However, I've noticed a problem that may affect your performance as a professional athlete, maybe sooner or later," said the coach.

"A problem!" Zachary mumbled, frowning.

In his two years at the academy, he had followed a strict training schedule and not wasted any time. Whether it was the coldest of winter days or the Christmas holiday, he had never missed a training session. So, he was at a loss regarding the problem that could affect his performance as a professional player. He waited anxiously for the coach to explain himself.

"Yes, there is an issue," Coach Johansen emphasized. "I've got no qualms about your work ethic and commitment towards training. However, you've got no social life outside of football. You've spent two years in Trondheim, but all you do is train and train and train."

"A social life!" Zachary was once again perplexed. He was in Norway to play football and make money. However, the coach had just mentioned that his lack of social life was a problem that could potentially hinder his career. Was that a joke? Moreover, the so-called social life was what had destroyed his career in his previous life.

"Yes, you lack a social life," the coach continued in a somber tone. "If I may ask, do you have a girlfriend? Or do you have more than three friends out of the football field?"

Zachary decided to maintain his silence.

"If the answers to those questions are on the negative, then you really lack a social life. As a coach, I'm only somewhat glad that you have been committing all your time to your career. However, once in a while, you need to let loose and relax. Having a girlfriend is one of the ways to unwind in the hectic world of football. Otherwise, you'll crumble, sooner or later."

"You and your agent should create a detailed schedule for your training from now on. The timetable should include well-defined resting times for the best effect. If possible, you should hire a professional trainer to help you with this. Miss Emily, what say you?"

"Coach, I think that's a great idea," Emily replied cheerfully. "Before I leave Trondheim, I'll help Zachary hire a fitness trainer. Regarding the rest issue, we could work with the club to achieve that. Moreover, there's a clause about this in the contract."

"But even if there is a clause, do you think Zachary would take a rest when he's given a day off?" Coach Johansen asked.

Both Emily and the sporting director burst into laughter at that.

They continued discussing Zachary's career as they neared the gates of the stadium. The coach continued giving Zachary advice on how to make it big on the professional stage. He even mentioned the problem of the late growth spurt that could potentially lead to injuries. He declared that he would be designing a training regimen to acclimatize Zachary to his growing physique come the following week. Coach Johansen wanted to ensure Zachary's risk of injury due to the growth spurt was reduced to the bare minimum before his debut.

"Emily, this must be your first time at Lerkendal?" Mr. Erik Hoftun, the sporting director, inquired as Coach Johansen steered the car into the gates of the stadium.

"You're wrong, director," Emily replied, shaking her head. "This is like my fourth time here at Lerkendal. Most of my meetings with Mr. Malvik took place here."

"But, I'm sure you didn't get a chance to tour the stadium," queried the sporting director, turning back to face Emily.

"You're right," Emily concurred. "This will be my first tour around Lerkendal. So, I'll take plenty of pics for my Facebook page." She smiled.

"Coach," Zachary chipped in as Coach Johansen steered his car into the parking lot. "I heard there are two pre-season matches against the Swedish teams, Malmö and Örebro SK, scheduled for next week. If I perform well in the Monday training, could I get a chance to join the starting squad?"

Coach Johansen laughed, shaking his head. "Zach, we've got to take things slow on the first team. I know you're very talented, but we need to handle your growth spurt problem first. We don't want our most promising young talent to get injured in a friendly even before the season starts." He paused, opening the door and stepping out of the vehicle. The rest followed suit and stepped out of the black Ford through their respective doors.

"Zach," the coach continued, his tone somber. "I implore you to take your growth spurt problem seriously. You have grown a couple of inches over only a few months. That will affect your running and dribbling posture. If you don't handle this carefully, you'll end up getting recurrent injuries even before your career takes off. Are we clear?"

"Yes, coach." Zachary nodded. "But I would like to point out that I've been doing a lot of agility enhancing drills over the past few months. I'm fully fit and ready to play at any time without risking injury."

Since his graduation from the academy, Zachary had been pondering the issue of the playing style he could utilize to fit better into the first team. In the academy, he'd mainly played as a half-striker instead of a midfielder. Zachary had often made dribbling runs through defenders to score goals. But he couldn't continue to utilize the same style at the professional stage since the defenders were much more skilled than youth players.

Instead, he intended to refine his game and adopt a precise passing approach in-order-to win a starting position on the Rosenborg first team. He hoped to turn into a Maestro who could dominate the game with only a few touches rather than dribbling through defenders. That way, he wouldn't have to worry about getting injured despite experiencing a late growth spurt. But for that to happen, the coach had to give him a chance to prove himself in a match first.

"Well, we'll see about that," Coach Johansen replied, picking his bag from the cabin of the Ford. "If you're fully fit, you can join the squad sooner than expected. But you need to know that it's not just my approval that you need to win over. You've also got to impress your teammates to the extent that they don't doubt your ability. That way, they won't question my decision when I add you to the squad. So, work hard, young man. But for now, let's forget the squad and training. Go with Mr. Hoftun to select your locker and finish the transfer procedures. We shall deal with the rest on Monday."

Lerkendal Stadion, the home ground of Rosenborg BK located three kilometers south of the city center, was a feast for the eyes. It was an all-seater stadium consisting of four three-tier grandstands without corners with a capacity for 21,421 spectators. About thirteen thousand were in club seating and luxury boxes on the center tier of all four stands.

Zachary and Emily followed Mr. Hoftun as they toured the stadium. They walked through all the Lerkendal Idresspark sports facilities, including the gyms, the three pitches, and the locker rooms.

Zachary had been training with the first team for a few months, so he was aware of most of the facilities. But he still followed the sporting director as he took him around the facilities introducing him to different club employees. By evening that day, Zachary had met the publicity secretaries, the various coaches, the gardeners, the gym attendants, and other managers—responsible for the day-to-day running of the Rosenborg facilities.

When he completed the tour, he had a brief meeting with Emily about his contract and hiring a personal trainer in a restaurant close to Rosenborg. He then headed back to his apartment to rest that evening, feeling fulfilled after signing the contract. He intended to purchase a new skill from the system that evening to prepare for the new season.

#### Chapter 95 - State Of Zachary's Attributes

"System, show me my current stats," Zachary intoned as he settled into one of the sofas in the living room of his apartment. He'd just arrived home from Lerkendal Stadion. On noticing that it was getting close to 6 PM, he had decided to check out his attributes before getting on with preparing dinner.

"DING"

A system notification sounded right after he finished voicing his command.

"Generating current user stats data," the system AI's feminine voice sounded directly within Zachary's mind. "User data has been loaded. Please follow the drop-down menus to navigate the interface and view your current data."

Zachary was glad the system had finally manifested an AI with a mental/voice communication function after its upgrade. He no longer needed to worry about teammates doubting his sanity whenever he used

his fingertips to navigate the system menu. The system had become more user-friendly since he could call out the AI with his thoughts.

As icing on the cake, it was a highly advanced artificial intelligence. It was capable of explaining most of the data on its interface. It behaved just like a talking encyclopedia of sports science, fitness, and football information.

With the AI, Zachary could easily design an effective training regimen to fit his current needs. He didn't need to bother hiring a physical fitness trainer to adapt to his growing physique. The system had already designed a mission to tackle the issue of the growth spurt three months prior. He had dissuaded Emily from hiring a trainer since he already possessed the highly-capable system.

"I should make a decision on which direction to develop my skills before the team training starts on Monday," Zachary mumbled, leaning back into the comfort of his sofa. He fixed his eyes on the familiar translucent blueish system interface that had appeared before him.

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SOCCER G.O.A.T SYSTEM

SYSTEM LEVEL: 3 (2700/10000 Juju-points to level-up)

USER: Zachary Bemba

AGE: 18 years

TALENT ASSESSMENT: Grade-A

JUJU-POINTS: 2700

(Evaluation: A promising young professional player)



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## USER MENU

\*USER STATS

\*G.O.A.T MISSIONS

\*SYSTEM SHOP (1 msg)

\*SYSTEM LOTTERY

\*SNOOPING TOOL

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

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Zachary grinned on seeing his stock of Juju-points. He had earned most of them from winning the Riga and Norway Youth Cups the previous year. Despite his colossal expenditure on elixirs and training in the system simulator, Zachary still had a whopping 2700 Juju-points in his possession. He had saved them up to buy a new skill after joining the Rosenborg senior team. Since he had finally signed the contract with Rosenborg, he could go ahead with the purchase.

"System," Zachary instructed mentally. "Bring out my user-stats data."

"DING"

"User-stats data coming up on the interface," the AI's feminine voice sounded in Zachary's mind as the contents of the translucent blue interface changed to display his primary attributes.

\*\*\*\*

\*USER STATS

->Physical Fitness: A+

->Soccer Technique: A+

->Game Intelligence: A+

->Mental Ability and Mindset: B+

->X-Factors: B+

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

\*\*\*\*

Zachary had been using physical conditioning elixirs to strengthen his physique over the previous year. Thanks to them, his physical fitness, soccer technique, and game intelligence attributes were all at the A+ grading. Only his mental ability and X-factor stats still lagged behind the rest at the B+ grading.

Zachary had hoped to upgrade all the attributes to A+ grading before joining the Rosenborg senior team. However, he'd found it no easy task to push those two attributes beyond the B+ grading. It seemed he had stumbled upon an impermeable bottleneck, preventing him from breaking past to the next grade, especially for his mental ability.

On the other hand, the X-factor was the most challenging attribute to develop. It solely depended on how he performed in competitive matches. He had to participate in competitive games on a regular basis while remaining consistent as the play-maker of his team and winning matches. Only then would the match-winning, consistency, and supernormal factors glacially rise and boost his X-factor.

Zachary deliberated for a bit before inspecting the rest of his stats. He needed to have a comprehensive understanding of his abilities before selecting which new skills to purchase from the system shop. "System," he intoned. "Take me through all my stats data."

"DING"

"User stats coming up," the system voiced as the contents of the screen before Zachary morphed into his physical-fitness data.

\*\*\*\*

\*USER STATS

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

Balance and Coordination: A+

Agility: A+

Strength: A+

Stamina: A+

Endurance Points: 9495/9500 (A+)

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Zachary had continued his strict training schedule over the past year. He had trained hard and upgraded all his physical fitness attributes to the A+ grading—with some help from the elixirs availed by the system.

However, he had still failed to bypass the bottleneck that impended his way to achieving the S grading in any of his physical attributes. Over the past year, he had focused on training his agility, intending to make it an S grade before his debut. He had strictly followed an agility-enhancing training regimen, day-in-day-out, but his efforts had proven futile. Even taking B-grade agility enhancing elixirs on two separate occasions had not helped him to achieve the grade. All his efforts were for naught.

He felt helpless since there seemed to be a massive bottleneck hindering him from attaining the S grade. He had sought help from the system about the issue. Instead, the AI had informed him to focus on upgrading his mental ability and mindset first. It had insisted he needed to steadily improve his mental aspect before attaining the S-grading in any of his other attributes. Zachary was confused by the AI's advice. According to his understanding, the mind's development should have been utterly unrelated to his physical fitness.

Zachary pushed his worries to the back of his mind after a few seconds. The AI had switched the interface display contents to his soccer-technique data. He concentrated once again on assessing his core football skills.

\*\*\*\*

\*USER STATS

->Soccer Technique: (Av. Rating: A+)

Ball Control: A+

Dribbling Skills: A+

Passing Accuracy: A+

Body Control: A+

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Zachary grinned as he perused through his skills data. He had managed to push both his dribbling skills and body control further—after consuming two doses of the agility-enhancing-elixir, coupled with training intensively on both the field and in the simulator over the course of the previous year.

Additionally, his mastery of the Cruyff-turn and Ronaldinho-Elastico-Dribble to a hundred percent completion had helped him achieve the feat much earlier than he'd expected. Zachary was quite pleased with himself.

After upgrading his dribbling, Zachary could move the ball in different directions at different speeds with both feet better than he had been able to the previous year. He could successfully maneuver through multiple opponents without losing possession by simply relying on agile footwork.

He had come to the understanding that superb drilling skills were essential to achieving success in football, especially in the midfield, after facing Valencia in the SIA Cup. In that match, his speed had failed to help him beat the highly technical Valencia youth players. The opponents had given him a hard time, especially in the latter part of the game, since his dribbling was lacking. He had ended up underperforming since the defenders had managed to put a stop to his signature runs through the midfield.

After that loss in the semi-final, Zachary had vowed to improve his dribbling skills. He had trained in the Cruyff-turn and Ronaldinho-Elastico-Dribble thousands of times—on both the physical field and the simulator. He also performed training drills designed by Coach Johansen to improve both his body control and agility.

He now understood the importance of body control and its effect on dribbling after consulting his coaches. Body control was the athlete's ability to move their body fluidly to optimize balance and

coordination. It applied to the correctness of form consisting of the nature of strides, correct running-form, and the management of a low center of gravity for better dribbling.

As Zachary's body control and agility improved, so did his dribbling and the pace of learning the two skills. In just three months, he had leveled-up the two attributes to the A+ grading.

"I wonder when I'll be able to improve my ability to the S grade," Zachary mumbled, returning his attention to the system interface. The AI had just switched the interface contents to his game-intelligence and mental-ability data.

\*\*\*\*

\*USER STATS

->Game Intelligence: (Av. Rating: A+)

Spatial Awareness: A+

Tactical Knowledge: A+

Risk Assessment: A+

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->Mental Ability and Mindset: (Av. Rating: B+)

Soccer Passion: A+

Composure and Mental Strength: C+

Coachability: B -

Self-Motivation: A+

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\*\*\*\*

Zachary's game intelligence attributes had not changed much over the past year. He'd only improved his tactical knowledge from the A- grading to the A+ grading. He was only a single step away from the game intelligence of most coaches in that attribute.

He could analyze risks and make sound decisions by himself on the pitch. The advantage gained from that had helped him win the majority of the games in his youth career. He couldn't help but wonder what his game intelligence would be capable of if it broke through to the S-grading.

Lastly, the AI switched the contents of the interface to his X-factor stats. Zachary leaned forward to have a better view of the attributes.

\*\*\*\*

## USER STATS

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

Consistency Factor: A-

Luck Factor: A-

Supernormal Factor: D-

Match Winning Factor: A+

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NB:

\*Luck Factor is not constant. It varies depending on the circumstances of the user. On a good day, it can be an S grade, while on a bad one, it can easily fall to an F.

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Zachary's frowned as he perused through his X-factor attributes. The AI had already explained to him the different stats under the X-factor. The consistency factor was related to how he maintained his form across many matches. He had to play at his best in every single game to have a high consistency factor. Zachary had managed to achieve an A- grade for that stat since he'd only lost two games since arriving in Norway. He had lost once against the senior Rosenborg senior team and another time against Valencia in the SIA Cup.

On the other hand, the match-winning factor referred to the rating of his contributions to his team's performance. It was an evaluation derived from a player's match performance details such as the goals scored, the assists made, the shots on target, the successful dribble attempts, the accurate passes vs. total passes ratio, etc.

Zachary had an A-grade match-winning factor because he'd been playing like a superstar in the academy. On most occasions, he managed to score or make key assists even when the rest of the team was underperforming.



"System," Zachary intoned after perusing through his X-factor data. "How can I improve my supernormal-factor attribute?"

"The user 'simply' has to improve his mental attributes and game intelligence," the feminine voice of the system's AI replied apathetically. "When the mental capabilities reach a given threshold, the user will automatically unlock more aspects of the supernormal factor. The user does not have to worry since he has already unlocked a supernormal state on two occasions."

## Chapter 96 - The Supernormal Factor

"I've already unlocked the supernormal factor on two occasions!" Zachary exclaimed, his mind quickly working in overdrive to deduce when that had happened. Then it all came to him. When he'd played in the Riga tournament during the February of the previous year, he'd accidentally entered a state of extreme focus in two of the matches.

Zachary could still recall the feeling of playing under that state clearly like it was just yesterday. He had played by instinct—a feat that made his dribbling and ball control flow like water. In the match against BK Frem in the Riga Cup semifinals, his thought process had been lightning fast. He had managed to score the second goal due to achieving that high level of focus. But, he hadn't known that it was related to the supernormal factor at that time.

"System," Zachary intoned. "Are the two occasions the times when I entered the extreme state of focus during the Riga Cup?" He asked, aching to confirm whether his conjecture was true.

"Positive," the AI replied. "On those two occasions, the user managed to achieve an extreme level of concentration called the zone."

"The zone is a supernormal state of mind. Under its thrall, an athlete is highly focused and can easily perceive even the slightest of changes around him," the AI continued. "The user must be in the initial state of awakening the zone mental ability as he can't control it yet."

"When trained to a high level, the user will be-able-to create an incorporeal domain around him, say of a 3-meter radius. The user can then easily perceive anything that happens in that domain—without even using his eyes. The spatial awareness of the user will also increase considerably. It'll then become trivial to assess risk and the positioning of both opponents and teammates on the pitch." "Such an ability really exists?" Zachary queried, his eyes widening with sheer disbelief.

"The user can be—assured that the zone ability is a must-have for any high-level team sports athletes," the system confirmed. "In such team sports like soccer and basketball, an athlete will have to keep track of both his opponents and teammates at all times. That way, he'll quickly analyze risk and find the best route to the goal. So, an athlete will have a marked advantage if he possesses a zone ability. The wider the zone he can create, the better his passing ability, spatial awareness, and risk analysis."

"I've to get the zone ability as soon as possible," Zachary resolved, feeling a surge of delight flowing through him. That was the dream cheat he needed to take his passing to the next level. "System, how can I develop my zone ability quickly?"

"You should focus on improving your mental abilities," the AI replied. "When your mind develops to a certain threshold, you'll be able to unlock your zone ability. The mental conditioning elixirs can help you in that regard."

Zachary's mood lightened on hearing the AI's response. Over the past four months, he had—been carrying out a progressive overload training system mission to acclimatize his body to the cold Trondheim weather. It was due the following week with the reward of a B-grade mental conditioning elixir on successful completion. Zachary was confident that he would succeed in completing all the tasks of the mission. That meant he could enhance his mental toughness using the elixir, possibly unlocking the zone ability. Zachary felt quiet contentment spread through him as he daydreamed about how far his skills would skyrocket after that.

"The user has to note that the chance of unlocking the zone ability with a B-grade mental conditioning elixir is about 2 %," the system's apathetic voice brought him back to earth. Zachary's mood dampened as that meant he would most likely fail than succeed.

"I should go ahead and buy a new skill to improve my chances on the first team," he mumbled, trying his best to cheer himself up. Instead of wallowing in worry about a supernormal factor with only a 2% chance of being unlocked, he was better off improving the other aspects of his attributes.

"System," instructed Zachary, leaning back into the comfort of the sofa. "Bring up my G.O.A.T Skills data."

"DING"

"G.O.A.T Skills info coming up on the interface," the AI sounded in Zachary's mind. He blinked as his eyes adjusted to the new contents of the screen.

\*\*\*\*

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

(i) ZINEDINE VISUAL JUJU

(1st-level: Progress: 90.001%)

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(ii) ZACHARY-ARROW-SHOT

(2nd-level: Progress: 1%)

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(iii) BEND-IT LIKE BECKHAM JUJU

(1st-level: Progress: 100%)

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(iv) CRUYFF-TURN

(Progress: 100%, Mastered beyond 100% completion.)

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(v) RONALDINHO ELASTICO DRIBBLE

(Progress: 100%, Mastered beyond 100% completion.)

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->G.O.A.T Skills Simulator

\*Activate \*Deactivate

(Activation costs 2 Juju-points per hour)

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Zachary had already mastered most of his acquired G.O.A.T skills by practicing them thousands of times over the course of the previous year. Only the Zinedine-Visual-Juju still lagged behind the rest at 90.001 % completion since he had stumbled upon a bottleneck in his mental aspect. The system AI had informed him he would only start making progress in the skill after enhancing his mental strength.

Zachary had been resisting the urge to buy a new skill since he was yet to master the ones already in his repertoire. He was a true believer in Bruce Lee's focused practice and a high level of proficiency philosophy. He would rather be the man who practiced one kick 10,000 times but not one who practiced 10,000 kicks once.

Zachary preferred to master a single G.O.A.T Skill to 100% completion rather than half-heartedly practicing more techniques in a short period. That was the reason he could remain focused and train a skill like the Ronaldinho Elastico Dribble thousands of times to achieve perfection.

However, since he'd already mastered all the trainable G.O.A.T-skills to 100 % mastery, he could afford to purchase a new skill from the system shop.

"System," he mumbled. "I would like to purchase new G.O.A.T Skills from the shop."

"DING"

"Command received," intoned the AI, the apathetic feminine voice resounding within Zachary's mind. "Data loading, please wait."

#### Chapter 97 - Purchasing A New Skill

Zachary remained silent while observing the translucent interface before him. He watched as the interface's contents slowly morphed into the system shop menu before zeroing on to the purchase-skills tab.

In an instant, three skill cards populated the translucent bluish screen before him. The three cards hovered before all the other contents of the interface.

One card depicted Andrea Pirlo, the legendary Italian Maestro, with the ball at his feet. The second portrayed Cristiano Ronaldo, in a Juventus jersey, heading the ball. The last had a picture of Robinho, the Brazilian footballer, with his right foot over the ball.

Below the three skill cards, a few words were—inscribed in beautiful calligraphy.

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

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2) CR7 Aerial-finishing Juju: For headers. Costs 2000 Juju-points.

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3) Robinho Step-Over Juju: For dribbling tricks and feints. Costs 2000 Juju-points.

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NB:

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

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

\*\*\*\*

"Oh, my God," Zachary could not help but exclaim after glancing at the cards. He had not expected that three legendary skills would appear in the system shop simultaneously.

"Damn, why does the system limit me to only a single purchase after every upgrade?" He wondered, gazing at the cards with starry eyes. If he could, he would have wished to purchase both the Snipe-it like Pirlo and the Robinho Step-Over Jujus. The two skills could take his game to another level, pushing him closer to the top of the technique pyramid as quickly as possible. But there was nothing he could do. He could only buy one skill until he could next upgrade the system.

"Let's go with the Robinho Step-Over Juju," Zachary mumbled before tapping the card portraying Robinho. He made his choice quickly since he didn't need to deliberate for long.

Robinho's quick successive step-over combination was one of the most desired skills in football. With its peculiar tricks and feints, Zachary was sure that he would be able to outsmart any opponent in the Tippeligaen.

Additionally, Robinho's step-over combination could trick the opponent even when standing in a single place. It was a technique that ignored the prime rule of never halting when with the ball. With just a quick flip-flap of the feet, a player skilled in Robinho step-overs could take on multiple opponents even when confined in narrow space.

"DING"

The system notification sounded as Zachary's right forefinger left the translucent blue screen.

"The user has chosen to purchase the Robinho Step-Over Juju from the system shop. 2000 Juju-points points will be deducted from the user when he confirms the purchase."

"But please note: the Robinho Step-Over Juju is a skill that has a minimum requirement of S-grade agility and body control. Thus, the user will not be able to practice the skill until he has upgraded the two attributes to the stipulated grade."

"Does the user still want to purchase the skill?" The AI queried in its apathetic voice.

Zachary kept his eyes on the interface as the words CONFIRM PURCHASE and CANCEL PURCHASE appeared above Robinho's skill card.

"System," intoned Zachary, his face morphing into a contorted expression depicting his displeasure. "Do you enjoy playing with my fragile heart? Why is the skill in the system shop if I'm not eligible to buy it?"

"The user should note that the skills added to the system shop after every upgrade are selected randomly from thousands of skills," the AI replied, without any emotion in its voice. "I have no control over which skills will appear in the shop. It all depends on your luck and the level of the system. If you want a higher level of control when purchasing the skills, please upgrade the system. Moreover, it's your fault for not managing to achieve the S-grade. You can only blame yourself for being unable to obtain the Juju."

Zachary sighed, shaking his head to clear his mind. Missing out on learning a skill wasn't the end of the world. He would get other chances to acquire the Robinho Step-Over Juju in the future. He just needed

to improve his fitness attributes—and then, he would attain the capability to learn most of the G.O.A.T skills.

Zachary turned his attention to the other cards on the screen after tapping on the cancel-purchase pop-up button. His gaze passed over the CR7 Aerial-finishing Juju and finally settled on the Snipe-it like Pirlo Juju. The skill was his next choice of purchase after failing to acquire the Robinho Step-Over Juju.

Zachary was no striker, so he didn't see the value in purchasing the aerial-finishing Juju. Instead, Pirlo's passing skills could elevate his game to the next level, making him a Maestro in the midfield.

"System," intoned Zachary. "You just claimed that skills appear in the shop following a random pattern. But why has the Snipe-it like Pirlo Juju surfaced once again?"

"The user should note that once a skill enters the system shop, it won't disappear unless it's purchased," the AI replied. "The Snipe-it-like-Pirlo Juju surfaced during the first upgrade. That's why it's still in the system shop."

"Oh, that makes sense," Zachary mumbled, nodding in understanding. He felt a glimmer of delight since he could purchase the Robinho Step-Over Juju when he met the system's requirements.

"Let me acquire the skill first," he mumbled, tapping on the card portraying Andrea Pirlo with the ball at his feet.

"DING"

"The user has chosen to purchase the Snipe-it-like-Pirlo Juju from the system shop. 300 Juju-points points will be deducted from the user when he confirms the purchase."

"Checking skill's requirements..." The AI continued.

"The user's attributes meet the skill's requirements."



"Congratulations. The user can go ahead and purchase the skill."

Zachary grinned like a Cheshire cat as he clicked on the confirm-purchase pop-up button.

"DING"

The system notification sounded once again as his finger left the screen.

"The user is attempting to learn a G.O.A.T Skill that leans heavily towards the mental aspects," voiced the AI. "Quantum mental conditioning is required to achieve the initial mastery in the skill."

"The user will feel a bit of discomfort as soon as the mental conditioning starts."

"Should we still proceed?"

"Yes, please proceed with the conditioning," Zachary replied in a somber tone, leaning back into the comfort of the sofa—just as a safety measure. He couldn't gauge what amount of discomfort he would face in the next few minutes. But he still had to be prepared for the worst-case scenario during the process.

"Loading required data and packages," the AI's feminine but apathetic voice resounded within Zachary's mind. "The system will start the quantum mental conditioning in 5, 4, 3, 2, 1—and 0."

"BOOM"

An explosion went off within Zachary's mind as soon as the countdown ended. His brain felt like it would swell beyond the capacity of his skull. A splitting headache soon followed as tides of mind-numbing pain ravaged his cognizance. They were the kind that stopped all other traffic in the brain, as suddenly all had met with red lights.

He couldn't help but wonder why he hadn't experienced such pain when he'd previously obtained the Zinedine-Visual-Juju from the system.

He could only bite on his shirt to stop himself from screaming as he withstood the 'bit of discomfort' imposed upon him by the system. He didn't want to alarm his neighbors—since as a worst-case, they could call the police. However, the feeling of bulging in his brain continued to grow, his eyes starting to see stars. Then nausea crept from his abdomen to his head, and the world went black.

## Chapter 98 - Merging Skills

Zachary woke with a start and sat bolt upright on the sofa. The morning sun was already beaming through the window, adorned with drawn silk curtains, on one side of his apartment's living room. The light rays reflected off the glass-top of his classic rectangular coffee table, blinding him momentarily because his pupils were—still dilated from sleep.

He cast a cursory glance at his wall clock and noticed that it was already 10 AM. Only then did he remember why he'd slept in the living room instead of the comfort of his well-furnished bedroom.

The previous evening he had purchased the Snipe-it-like-Pirlo Juju from the system shop. He had immediately gone through the mental conditioning required to learn the skill but had blacked out during the process. He couldn't help but tremble on recalling the mind-numbing pain he'd gone through the previous night.

"System, did I succeed in learning the skill?" He queried, standing up from the sofa and stretching his limbs. He couldn't feel any differences in his body compared to the previous day. He only felt a little dizzy, probably as an after-effect of the mental conditioning procedure.

"Reporting to the user," the system AI intoned in its signature feminine but impassive voice. "Both the mental conditioning and the addition of the Snipe-it-like-Pirlo Juju data into the user's mind was very successful."

"Why is it that I feel nothing different about myself?" He inquired. He then took a few steps and looked out of the window. It was a slow Saturday morning. Only a few vehicles and pedestrians were moving on the streets below his apartment building.

"The user will feel the difference while playing football," the AI responded. "Please be rest assured that the information necessary to achieve initial mastery of the skill has already been ingrained into the user's core instincts."

"The user can now easily use the Snipe-it-like-Pirlo basic passing skills on the pitch."

"Does the user wish to check his progress in learning the skill on the system panel?"

"Yes," Zachary responded, walking back and settling into a sofa. "Please show me the skills menu."

"Command received," intoned the system. "G.O.A.T Skills tab coming up on the interface. Please wait a second."

Zachary blinked as his eyes adjusted to the luster of the translucent bluish interface. He watched as the G.O.A.T Skills he'd mastered populated the entire length of the screen.

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->G.O.A.T Skills: 6

(i) ZINEDINE VISUAL JUJU

(1st-level: Progress: 90.001%)

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(ii) ZACHARY-ARROW-SHOT

(2nd-level: Progress: 1%)

----

(iii) BEND-IT LIKE BECKHAM JUJU

(1st-level: Progress: 100%)

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(iv) CRUYFF-TURN

(Progress: 100%, Mastered beyond 100% completion.)

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(v) RONALDINHO ELASTICO DRIBBLE

(Progress: 100%, Mastered beyond 100% completion.)

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(vi) SNIPE-IT LIKE PIRLO JUJU

(Progress: 10%)

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->G.O.A.T Skills Simulator

\*Activate \*Deactivate

(Activation costs 2 Juju-points per hour)

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"DING"

The system notification sounded while Zachary was still perusing through the skill data.

"The system has detected two skills that match in usability and learning requirements," the AI intoned. "The Zinedine-Visual-Juju and Snipe-it-like-Pirlo-Juju are the skills in question. They can be merged into one at the cost of 1500 Juju-points by the system."

"Does the user wish to merge the two skills?"

Zachary's felt a surge of delight flowing through him after hearing the AI's question.

He'd already noticed that his mastery of the Snipe-it-like-Pirlo Juju had already advanced to 10% over a single night. That meant that he could already make use of the knacks that came with the Juju. He was already content since it would elevate his game reading and passing skills, especially in the midfield.

But on hearing that the system could merge the skills, Zachary was momentarily stunned, speechless. He couldn't help but wonder how such a feat was feasible when the two Jujus originated from two different players.

"System," he intoned. "Are there any drawbacks that'll follow after the merging of the two skills?"

"Yes, there are," the AI responded right away. "The user will lose some bit of mastery after the system completes the merging of the two skills."

[As I thought.] Zachary mused inwardly.

"Does the user wish to merge the Zinedine-Visual and Snipe-it-like-Pirlo Jujus?" The AI prompted once again. "Please note: the resulting skill will be much better than the two skills used separately."

"The merged skill will be better!" Zachary mumbled, stroking his chin. "Okay, proceed with the merging of the two skills." He commanded, leaning back into the sofa. Since the system had assured him that the resulting skill would be better, there wasn't a reason to avoid the merging. Maybe, it would be the skill that could help him rise to the top of the Tippeligaen. He 'simply' had to take a leap of faith.

"Command received."

"1500 Juju-points have been deducted."

"The merging of Zinedine-Visual and Snipe-it-like-Pirlo Jujus will commence in 5, 4, 3, 2, 1—and 0."

"BOOM"

And once again, an explosion went off in the confines of his mind. He then experienced the familiar splitting headache that threatened to put a halt to all of his conscious thoughts. However, that time around, Zachary hardened his resolve and passed through the torment without blacking out. In only a couple of minutes, the waves of pain in his head receded like a tide.

"Zinedine-Visual and Snipe-it like-Pirlo merging complete," the AI intoned. "The user can go ahead and name the new skill."

"That quick?" Zachary queried, his voice a pitch higher than he had intended. He'd expected to go through torture comparable to that of the previous day. However, in just a few minutes, the system had already merged the skills successfully. That did not make much sense to him.

"Yes, that quick," the AI confirmed. "As there wasn't any need for the user to go through another mental conditioning routine, the system was able to carry out the merging in only a few minutes. Please go ahead and name the new skill." The AI urged once again.

"Just name it the Zinedine-Pirlo Mental Juju," Zachary said, returning his focus on the system interface before him. Since the two skills were related to the game intelligence and mental aspects, Zachary decided to name them as a type of mental-juju.

"Command received."

"Naming the new skill as Zinedine-Pirlo Mental Juju."

"Skill data has been—updated in the system."

Zachary heard the AI articulate as new data populated the translucent blueish interface. The number of G.O.A.T skills on the panel reduced from six to five. The new Zinedine-Pirlo Mental Juju appeared on the screen in the fifth position, with 49.009% mastery.

Zachary was glad his mastery of the new skill had not started at zero. With 49% progress, he could use the new Juju in a match after a few training sessions. His only disappointment was that his game intelligence and the other mental attribute stats hadn't advanced.

He closed the system interface after perusing through some of his other stats. After merging the skills, he remained with a balance of only 900 Juju-points. He planned to save those for his daily usage—such as when purchasing the physical conditioning elixirs. He would also use them when activating the system simulator—the virtual world where he trained most of his techniques.

Zachary then quickly prepared a heavy breakfast comprising oven-baked chicken thighs, French fries, a banana, milk, and juice. He was starving since he hadn't eaten dinner the previous night. Moreover, it seemed like the mental conditioning had sapped all his energy reserves.

Thus, he eagerly feasted on more than half a kilogram of food before going out for his routine morning jog. He needed to run eight miles so-as-to complete the system mission task for that morning. It was part of the routine to acclimatize his body to the cold weather, which Zachary didn't wish to miss for anything in the world.

Out of his apartment building, the rising sun cast a rosy hue across the morning sky. Zachary took a moment to soak into the golden rays that were so rare on a typical March morning in Trondheim. In an odd counterpoint, the morning breeze was chilly on his skin. So, he zipped his Nike running jacket, put on his woolen head sock, and started jogging a few seconds later.

He got into the zone as soon as he was out on the streets—his strides short and consistent. His body seemed to have achieved a form of whole-body meditation as he raced along the sidewalk. At times, he would explode with speed to hone his sprinting and endurance. At others, he would abruptly change directions, making consecutive tight turns, so-as-to perfect his body control.

He 'simply' kept running like each step mattered, whizzing past the few pedestrians on the street. Then, before he knew it, his apartment building was before him, and all that was—left to do was let his legs crumple and rest as they wanted to.

However, he didn't allow himself to relax immediately. He stretched for a few minutes in front of his building, thereby completing the system's progressive overload mission task for that morning. He was then one step closer to obtaining the mental conditioning elixir as the reward for the mission.

Zachary ascended the stairs, hoping to take a quick shower before planning-on what to do the rest of the day. He hated days when there was no training. He wished he could join the rest of the other Rosenborg players at Lerkendal Idresspark to train. However, the coach had 'advised' him several times to take some time off from the intensive practice that weekend.

"I should probably buy a PlayStation like Kendrick suggested, to help me pass through my rest days," he mumbled. He immersed his entire psyche into his musings without bothering about his surroundings.

"Thankfully, there is the El Clásico today. I will watch that, maybe with the guys at Moholt."

He continued ascending the stairs leading to the sixth floor by sheer instinct. Meanwhile, his mind shifted into a higher gear, trying to recall who had ended up winning that El Clásico game in his previous life. Was it Real Madrid or Barcelona? But he couldn't remember as he hadn't watched that match in his past life.

Along the stairs, he seemed to hear someone calling out. But he didn't turn back since he didn't expect any visitors or know any of his neighbors personally.



"Zachary," the person once again called out. But that time around, he could tell that the feminine voice was calling out his name. He turned around, and to his surprise, found a girl he didn't expect to meet any time soon, a few steps away. She stood by the door on the fourth floor, smiling at him like a long-lost friend who had finally been—found.

"Miss Kristin Stein," Zachary exclaimed, feeling his heart start to race. "What are you doing here?"

#### Chapter 99 - Unexpected Neighbor

Kristin laughed. "Your reaction is priceless. Why shouldn't I be here? This is my apartment, after all." She said, pointing at the door behind her. "Instead, it is I who should be asking why you're at my doorstep."

Zachary gave her a look over, wondering whether she was being serious or joking. "You really live here, in this building?" He asked after a moment, his voice slightly higher than he'd intended.

It had been close to two years since he'd last seen her, but she'd grown more beautiful. She was even more gorgeous. Her intelligent amber eyes matched her long blonde hair, which she wore in a ponytail. She had a full, womanly figure. The curves of her hips and the fullness of her bosom brought to mind the idea of perfection. Most Norwegian ladies that Zachary had met were not excessively curvy. Kristin was the exception in that regard. Even her Nike Air running jacket and pair of baggy pants couldn't hide her shapely figure.

"Yes, that's right," Kristin replied, the corners of her lips curling into a soft smile. "This has been my apartment for about five years. But why are you here?"

"I live in the apartment on the sixth floor," Zachary replied. "I moved in at the start of January. However, I haven't seen you in this neighborhood even once. Are you sure you're a resident here?"

"Yes, of course," Kristin replied. "But, I've been away for my studies since last August. So, my roommate was alone in the apartment for the past six months."

"But that aside," Kristin continued, tilting her head for a moment and studying him. "I heard from my grandpa that you graduated from the academy last December. That means that you must have already signed a contract with Rosenborg. Is that right?"

Zachary sighed, folding his arms across his chest. "The negotiations with the club took longer than expected. I only managed to sign the professional contract yesterday."

"Yeh, that's great news," she said, pumping her fist into the air like a football player celebrating a goal. "Have you joined the senior or the youth team?"

"The senior team, of course," Zachary replied, beaming. "That's at least according to the terms of the contract."

"Congratulations. Not many can sign a professional contract right after graduating from the academy. Academy graduates usually have to become under-19s or under-21s before joining the first team. The coaches must be very impressed with your skills since they allowed you to join the team right away. You should work hard and treasure the opportunity." She added, taking on the tone of an elder.

"Thank you," Zachary replied, not minding her tone one bit. "I'll try my best on the senior team."

"If I remember correctly, Rosenborg will be playing Odds BK on the 17th of this month. That's only two weeks from now. There must also be some more pre-season friendly matches before that. Isn't that right?"

"Yes." Zachary nodded in assent. "Before playing Odds BK, we'll first face the Swedish teams, Malmo and ?rebro. The two matches will be played in Sweden on Tuesday and Thursday this week."

Kristin arched her brows, giving him a once-over from the head to the toes. "Then why aren't you training with the team today? Don't you intend to make it to the first team as soon as possible?" She asked.

"Of course, I would have loved to train with the team today. However, Coach Johansen and the sporting director strictly advised me to take the weekend off and rest my body. That's why I'm here jogging alone instead of being at Lerkendal."

"Oh!" Kristin smiled, giving him an arch look. "I can see that you're doing your best to rest your body then."

"Jogging is a form of resting," Zachary emphasized. "There are tons of sports science articles that support this conjecture."

Kristin smiled, raising her hand in a placating gesture. "Zach! You don't have to be defensive with me. I'm not your manager. But be careful not to openly disobey the coach's orders when you've just entered the team."

"Would you like to come and visit me since you have got a day off?" Kristin intoned, changing the topic. "I have warm coffee—the best at warming the body after being out in the cold. Moreover, I would like to hear about your adventures in Riga and Valencia." She laughed.

"Not today," Zachary replied, shaking his head. "I'm still sweaty from running, so maybe I'll have the coffee next time."

"Oh, that's fine," Kristin said. "We can maybe organize and have dinner some other time. Where is your friend Kasongo by the way? Is he still in the academy?"

"Yes, he is in the academy. But he should be joining the under-19 team pretty soon. They'll be going through the youth team trials next week."

"So, don't you want to brag to me about your performance in the academy," she said, giving him an arch look. "I heard that you were on fire during the international youth tournaments."

"There isn't much to tell about the tournaments. We worked as a team to win in Riga and reach the semis in Valencia. Of course, I was the top scorer in the two tournaments." He emphasized, wanting to look good in front of Kristin.

"You must have worked very hard for the academy to obtain such achievements." Kristin smiled, nodding. "It's a pity that everyone at the club believes that Coach Johansen performed some miracle to win the two cups last year. They don't get that it was all your doing. That was why he got the Rosenborg head coaching job despite his inexperience in the top-tier leagues. He almost didn't face any competition."

"But, Coach Johansen is a great coach," Zachary argued. "Why do you sound like you're dissatisfied with him?"

"Really?" Kristin raised an eyebrow. "Do you think we can trust him to take the team back to the top?"

She sighed. "I don't want to see the team end up performing poorly like last season. To put it simply, Coach Johansen doesn't give me confidence in the club this season."

"That's understandable." Zachary nodded. "But, Coach Johansen is a great coach. I have played under him for two years. He knows how to utilize the capabilities of all his players. Furthermore, he is not rigid and can easily adapt to novel situations quickly. You don't have to worry about the club this season."

"I hope so," Kristin mumbled, shaking her head. "It would be bad if we continued underperforming this season."

Zachary couldn't help but recall Rosenborg's performance the previous season. The team only managed to finish third in the Tippeligaen and were even eliminated by Molde, their arch-rivals, at the fourth round stage of the Norwegian Football Cup. To make matters worse, they took a harsh beating in the Europa League—not advancing further than the group stage. The season had been a disappointment to both the fans and the management since it was unbecoming their history.

That was why the management was eager to shake things up and change the club situation. They started a back-to-the-roots project that aimed to take the club back to the top of the Norwegian Football tournaments.

They had appointed Coach Boyd Johansen the previous December since he'd just won two cups while coaching the academy team that-very-year. But his appointment faced a lot of backlash from most of the Rosenborg fans since they wanted the club to hire Coach Per Joar Hansen instead.

"Enough about the coach," Kristin intoned, interrupting Zachary's contemplation.

"Why don't you work hard and help us win the league this season? My grandpa says that you're the most talented player he has ever come across in his scouting career. So, it should be a piece of cake for you to take us to the quarter-finals of the Europa League." She laughed, regarding him with a relaxed, calculating expression.

"You must be jesting Miss Kristin." Zachary smiled wryly. "I haven't even made it to the starting line-up, but here you're, asking me to take the club to the quarter-finals of the Europa League. Do you have that much faith in me?" He held her gaze.

"Well," Kristin mumbled. "Not you. But I believe in my grandpa's vision. He has never made a mistake about a player's worth. Since he regards you that highly—comparing you to the likes of JJ Okocha and Yaya Toure, you should at least be able to help us win the league." She looked at him with puppy eyes, taking a step forward and holding his hands. "Isn't that right?"

Zachary was struck speechless.

He had never realized that Miss Kristin had such a playful side to her. He had always assumed she was one of those 'queen-bee types' who looked down on everyone else. But it seemed he'd been wrong.

"Won't you say yes to my simple request?" Kristin prompted.

"Are you serious?"

Kristin met Zachary's gaze and spoke softly. "Yes, I'm serious. You 'just' have to make this one promise of helping us reach the quarter-final of the Europa League..." She stopped mid-sentence as another voice came through her apartment's door that was slightly ajar.

"Kristin," the other soft voice called. "What are you doing outside? You're about to miss the beginning of the show."

"Monica," yelled Kristin, turning around to face the door. "I'll be there in a moment."

She then returned her attention to Zachary. "You should really join us at least for lunch?" Kristin once again urged. "That was my roommate in there, just now. So, you'll get a chance to have lunch with two beautiful girls." She gave him an arch look.

"No, maybe another time," insisted Zachary, his tone firm. "I really have to get back to my place and take a shower. Or else, I'll get a cold. That would affect my training on Monday morning."

Although he enjoyed Kristin's company, he didn't want to spend his Saturday watching soaps and reality TV shows in a girls' apartment. That would be even more tiring than playing an intensive football game.

"Okay, then," Kristin said, smiling. "See you around."

"See you around," Zachary replied before turning around and heading up the stairs.

#### Chapter 100 - A Breakthrough In The Mental Attributes

Zachary woke up early, at around five, that Monday. He quickly tossed the covers aside, slipped out of bed, and started a routine of 120 sit-ups. He'd spent most of his weekend resting and watching football matches, so the exercise didn't tire him in the slightest.

When he completed the sit-ups, he immediately washed his face and went out for his routine morning run. He had to jog six miles in-order-to complete a system mission task. Even knowing he would be attending his first training session as a Rosenberg professional player a few hours later couldn't stop him.

Zachary was more motivated than ever to complete the mission tasks and receive the mental conditioning elixir reward before joining the team training. He couldn't postpone since he wouldn't get any other free time to complete them for the rest of the day.

So, he braved the early morning cold and ran across the streets of Trondheim. They were devoid of any traffic, save for a couple of heavy trucks. He jogged with a consistent rhythm and managed to complete his six-mile run in only 33 minutes. He then stretched for a bit in front of his building before ascending the stairs to his apartment.

When he was back in the confines of his living room, he removed his running shoes and jacket and switched on the light. He felt fatigued after doing the 120 seat-ups plus all the running. Nevertheless, he didn't allow himself to rest for an extended period.

He was eager to improve his skills, especially after having signed the contract with Rosenberg. He wouldn't let a little fatigue bar the path towards his goals.

So, he chugged down some water and ate some glucose to refill his depleted energy reserves as he tried to regulate his breathing. And thanks to the C-grade physical conditioning elixir he'd been taking for months, he could recover his energy much faster than humanly possible. In only a few minutes, he felt somehow rejuvenated.

Without wasting time, he started going through a light yoga regimen involving a set of routines designed by the system to improve his body control.

Zachary had been in love with yoga ever since he'd returned to his past since it could help him prevent injuries on the pitch. That was the reason he had always been motivated while practicing yoga. Moreover, it was the only exercise capable of helping him adapt to his growing physique as quickly as possible by improving his flexibility and balance.

Zachary went through the different yoga stances with a methodical-approach. He started with the tree-pose, then the standing-forward bend, bridge-pose, bow-pose, headstand, shoulder stand, etc. He spent a dozen or so seconds on each pose before transitioning to the next.

Beads of sweat glistened on his forehead before rolling down and soaking his t-shirt as he exercised. Nonetheless, he didn't halt the session until he had practiced all the Hatha-yoga poses he could think of at that moment. When he completed the last posture, he collapsed, only managing to lay on the tiled floor supine, arms spread out as he gasped for simple breath.

"DING"

No sooner had he settled on the floor to rest than the system notification sounded within the confines of his mind.

"The user has completed the mission: Preparations to Become a Pro," intoned the AI. "The user can view the system completion report on the interface right away."

"Bring up the mission completion message," Zachary commanded, grinning. He was glad that he could finally obtain the B-grade mental conditioning elixir after completing the system mission.

"Command received."

"Mission completion report coming up."

Zachary picked up a towel from a nearby rack and wiped his face. He then settled on a stool close to the balcony before focusing his attention on the system interface.

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#4 new messages

CONGRATULATIONS

-> You have completed the mission: Preparations to Become a Pro.

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->Mission-Rewards

1) B-grade mental conditioning elixir (Available in system-shop).

NB: The user must consume the elixir within 5 seconds after being removed from the system shop.)

2) 100 Juju-points

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->Mission Summary



\*Task 1: Run 60 miles each week (for four months) in the outdoor environment. Task goal: To help the user to adapt to playing in cold weather. (Average miles completed for each week over the past four months: 65 miles. Task Rating: A+)

\*Task 2: Complete 90 seat-ups daily during the first month, 100 seat-ups daily during the second, 110 seat-ups daily during the third, and 120 seat-ups daily during the fourth month. Task goal: To improve the user's body control by strengthening and toning his core-stabilizing abdominal muscles. (Task completed successfully. Task Rating: A+)

\*Task 3: Complete seven rounds of half a dozen Hatha-Yoga routines daily over four months. Task goal: To improve the user's body control by enhancing his flexibility and strengthening the core muscles. (Task completed successfully. Task Rating A+)

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Overall Mission Rating: A+

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->Bonus rewards

You have earned a bonus of 10 Juju-points

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He could hardly contain his delight after perusing through the system message. He was eager to use the elixir right away but stopped himself after a moment of deliberation.

"System," he intoned. "Will the consumption of the B-grade mental conditioning elixir bring some discomfort to me?" Zachary didn't want to end up missing his first Rosenberg training due to blacking out or some other side effect of the elixir.

"Negative," the system responded right away. "On the contrary, the user will feel refreshed after consuming the mental conditioning elixir."

"That's great." Zachary smiled, casting a glance at his clock. It was only 6:40 AM. He still had slightly more than two hours before the start of the training session. That was more than enough time for him to clean up, shower, and take breakfast. He could even afford to fix-in the consumption of the elixir into his schedule. Thus, he decided to get to the task right away.

Zachary opened the gift-pack tab that was blinking red in the system shop. As soon as his right forefinger left the translucent blueish screen, a system notification sounded in his head. A new message populated the interface before him.

"DING"

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#1 new messages

CONGRATULATIONS

You have received a System Gift: B-grade mental conditioning elixir as a mission completion reward.

Please select the gift card in the inventory to retrieve the elixir.

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NB: The user must consume the elixir within five seconds after removal from the system shop.

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Zachary was already an expert at retrieving gifts from the system. So, he clicked on the inventory tab and selected the card with an image of a lemon fruit drawn on it. And as he expected, the minuscule-sized green lemon, about a centimeter in diameter, popped out of the translucent bluish interface and dropped into his outstretched hand.

Zachary didn't dawdle since he only had five seconds to consume the elixir. He tossed the small green lemon into his mouth immediately.

It tasted like the 'real' bitter lemon on his tongue as it melted and diffused into his bodily systems.

Zachary felt a wave of coldness wash over his mind as the elixir worked its magic. It felt like his higher brain was incapacitated, his thoughts sluggish like he'd been drinking hard liquor. But in the next instant, the feeling faded as a surge of euphoria engulfed his consciousness.

Like the AI had promised, the effect of the mental conditioning elixir was instant rejuvenation.

Zachary seemed to hear chimes ringing within the confines of his mind as his thoughts quickened, becoming much clearer than before with every passing second. He closed his eyes, savoring and soaking into the sensation until it came to pass, and his cognition returned to normal.

"System," he intoned. "Bring out my mental attribute data." Zachary wished to understand how much of a change the B-grade mental conditioning elixir had brought to his mind.

"DING"

"Command received," the AI responded.

"Mental attribute data coming up on the interface."

Zachary blinked as his eyes adjusted to the new contents of the translucent bluish screen before him.

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->Mental Ability and Mindset: (Av. Rating: A-)

Soccer Passion: A+

Composure and Mental Strength: B+

Coachability: B -

Self-Motivation: A+

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He felt drunk with happiness as he perused through his mental attributes. His composure and mental strength stat had finally broken through from the C+ to the B+ grading. It had even leaped over a grade, thereby pushing his overall mental-ability and mindset to the A- grading. He even noticed that his mastery of the Zinedine-Pirlo Mental Juju had progressed from 49.009% to 59.009% after his breakthrough. His only disappointment was that he seemed not to have awakened the zone ability even after consuming the B-grade elixir.

"System," he said, standing up and heading to his bedroom. "Is there a sure way to unlock my zone ability as soon as possible?" He took off his training gear, caked with sweat, before heading into the bathroom.

"The surest way of unlocking the user's supernormal abilities is by consuming an S-grade mental conditioning elixir." He heard the AI articulate as he stepped into the bathroom. "Since the user has already unlocked the zone ability on two prior occasions, he'll surely be successful if he utilizes the elixir."

"Then, how can I obtain the S-grade elixir?" Zachary pressed, opening the tap and starting to shower. He couldn't purchase the A and S grade elixirs since they were still unavailable in the system shop. They were still shrouded in grey on the shop menu.

"The user has to accomplish some achievements first, and the purchase of the S-grade elixirs will be—unlocked," the IA replied. "The user can also win the elixirs after completing some of the system missions. The system will notify the user immediately in case such opportunities exist in the near future."

Zachary decided not to pester the AI anymore. He 'simply' had to play his best on the pitch—and the chances to win or purchase the elixir would surely manifest before him.

So, he focused on cleaning up. He still had to eat breakfast before heading to Lerkendal for the Rosenborg first-team training before 9:00 AM. He had no intention of being late for his first training as a professional player.