

Greatest 51

Chapter 51 - A Good Start

Zachary smiled as he expertly flicked the ball in-between the last defender's legs using the outer part of his boot. He made a tiny touch that pushed the ball only about a meter away from the defender, into the box.

A figure dashed towards the ball—it was Kasongo! Riga's defenders were beaten and did not react. Kasongo remained unnoticed until he unleashed a missile of a shot towards goal.

The ball exploded away and sped past the keeper. But to Zachary's dismay, it bounced off the post and rebounded into the pitch. Kasongo had missed a good scoring opportunity. He held his head in between his hands in dejection.

"The ball is still in play," Zachary shouted as he chased after the ball that had just bounced close to the penalty spot. His heart pounded louder in his chest as he strained to get to it before Riga's goalkeeper.

However, he wasn't fast enough. The keeper dived incredibly towards the bouncing ball and punched it out of the box, beyond Zachary's reach. He had jumped like an acrobat, a distance of around two meters—to get to the ball before Zachary.

"Freekick," Zachary heard one of his teammates, probably Magnus, shout from behind him. "He pulled at our captain's shirt just in front of the box."

FWEEEEEEEE!

Hope bloomed inside Zachary as the sound of a whistle followed the entreaty. He turned around only to find the referee, in a yellow uniform, pointing at the spot where the defender had pulled on his shirt. He realized he still had a chance to put the ball into the net. The referee had allowed an advantage to play only because of the goal-scoring opportunity. He had recalled the ball for a freekick as soon as Kasongo missed the chance. And better yet, the setpiece was right at the edge of the box.

The referee showed the tall center-back that had committed the foul a yellow card. The player tried to complain in a language Zachary couldn't understand, probably Latvian or Russian—but the referee was having none of his nonsense. He shooed him away and started arranging for NF academy's freekick.

"Zachary," Coach Johansen shouted from the sidelines. "Try to test their goalkeeper."

Zachary nodded to indicate that he'd received the message. He picked up the ball from the referee and placed it on the ground, a few feet away from the edge of the box.

"I'm sorry I couldn't score," Kasongo came up to him and apologized. "Just don't know what came over me."

Zachary gave his friend a soft smile and replied: "Don't mind that. Focus on the game for now. We need you to stay sharp for the entirety of the match. Even the best players in the world miss chances occasionally. You'll do better on the next opportunity." He advised.

"I will," Kasongo vowed, thumping his chest. "Good luck. I have faith that you'll score." He added before walking away, leaving Zachary standing alone before the ball.

Zachary sighed and shook his head. He understood Kasongo's state of mind. Scoring the freekick would lessen his guilt of missing a golden opportunity.

[I'll try my best.] He vowed inwardly.

The referee soon finished organizing the wall and signaled Zachary to prepare to take the freekick. In the meantime, NF academy's players moved back and forth around the box, attempting to destabilize Riga's defensive line. They did their best to improve their chances of scoring without falling in offside positions.

Zachary calmed his mind and took a few steps back from the ball. He was at the moment of truth. He could finally test the fruits of all his past training in an official match.

He felt his heart pounding harder inside his chest. However, he suppressed his anxiety—by sheer will, and focused on the setpiece.

He then concentrated his mind and observed his surroundings, trying his best to pick out the details that would give him an edge for the freekick. The Riga goalkeeper was slightly short, maybe 5 feet 9, by

Zachary's estimation. He was shouting orders to his teammates to position themselves better to bar the freekick from reaching the goal.

The wall was long and high, with taller players in the middle. Zachary resolved to keep the freekick high. That way, the keeper would have no chance of saving it. He had to use his left foot since the freekick was positioned slightly to the right of the goalposts.

When the referee blew the whistle, Zachary ran towards the ball at a measured speed. He fixed his gaze on the ball, made a final jump-step, and smashed the ball with the inside of his left boot.

He aimed to curve the ball past the six-player-wall. The accuracy was somewhat left to chance. He hadn't perfected his Bend-it like Beckham Juju to the level where he would reliably hit the target every single time he took a freekick.

The shot flashed past the defenders, seemingly headed straight for the outside of the goalposts, until it abruptly curved for the top left corner at the last moment. The ball went into the back of the net.

The Riga goalkeeper didn't manage to react. He only turned and watched the ball spinning in the back of the net. 1:0. The NF academy had scored the first goal in the 15th minute.

Zachary celebrated like Paul Otterson, pumping his fists, sharing his elation of scoring the goal with his teammates. There was nothing quite like the joy of working hard towards something and finally achieving it. His setpiece technique had—finally taken shape after months of training.

Meanwhile, a silence swept across the Skonto Arena for the first time since the beginning of the game. Zachary's goal had silenced the cheers of the home fans.

"I didn't expect to find such a player in a simple Norwegian academy," said a VfB Stuttgart player of medium build in German. He was in the stands and had just watched Zachary score from the freekick.

"What do you expect," his friend beside him, who was a few inches taller, replied. "Josh, the world is big—and talents are always cropping out from everywhere. Just get used to it." He added nonchalantly.

"I would have loved to compete against him. But unfortunately, he won't make it past the group stages. His team seems like a one-man-army type."

Chapter 52 - Kendrick In The Goal

The JFC Riga team didn't let up the pressure despite conceding a goal in the 15th minute. Instead, they intensified their attacks.

Kendrick Otterson, the NF academy goalkeeper, took note that the opponents had increased their pace and begun bearing down more frequently on the NF academy's box—towards his goal.

Despite that, not many attempts from the JFC Riga team players made it into his box. The five NF academy defenders ensured that none of the strikers, wingers, or attacking midfielders got a clear shot at the goal. They relentlessly obstructed the majority of incoming efforts.

Kendrick found himself in a situation where he only had to deal with shots with little power for the first 30 minutes.

The Riga team was still dictating play with possession of at least 75%, by his estimation. However, their gameplay lacked substance and execution. They failed to create that final ball that could seamlessly link their midfield to their attackers—leaving their two strikers isolated throughout most of the first half. The situation often forced their attacking midfielders and wingers to take shots from outside the eighteen-yard box—instead of passing the ball forward.

However, Kendrick didn't dare relax.

He was a goalkeeper—the one player that had to remain alert regardless of how the game was going. The ball could easily transition from the midfield to the box in a matter of seconds. A goalkeeper had to be fully prepared to make saves whenever anything unexpected occurred.

Kendrick was determined to do his best throughout the tournament. The addition of Zachary Bemba to the academy team had motivated him. His excellence inspired the rest of his teammates to do their best even when they were on the back foot. The NF academy players came to life whenever he got the ball.

They were pretty confident in Zachary. They were sure that he would score or make a good pass every time he was on the ball. All they had to do was defend adequately—and voila, they would win the game thanks to Zachary's creativity during counterattacks.

Kendrick forced himself out of his reverie. The Riga left wing-back had just unleashed a cross into his box. He took a quick glance around him and noticed that JFC Riga's two strikers were dashing into the box to attack the incoming ball.

For a moment, he was undecided on whether to run out and meet them or stay put between his goalposts. However, the decision was—quickly taken out of his hands. One of the strikers out-jumped Lars Togstad, NF academy's center-back, and planted a header towards the goal. The ball flew downwards, approaching the inside of the right post.

Kendrick didn't waste time thinking about how to handle the incoming ball. He let his instinct guide him.

He emptied his mind of everything else—except for that single trajectory that would soon turn into a goal for the Riga team if it was left unobstructed.

He took a small step in the direction the ball was heading, simultaneously keeping a close eye on the ball. Guided by pure reflex, he dived towards the incoming ball and made a comfortable save.

He scooped the ball up with ease and hugged it to his chest to keep it from rebounding back to the Riga strikers.

From his position on the ground, he noticed that Zachary was signaling him from the midfield. Kendrick jumped up suddenly—like a person bitten by soldier ants in his delicate parts. The coach had personally instructed him to release players as quickly as possible after repelling attacks. He could not afford to waste any time.

He immediately ran towards the edge of the box, past one of the two Riga strikers, and made a long one-handed throw to the midfield, where Zachary lay in wait.

The JFC Riga midfielders began running back towards their half, chasing after the ball. But the slight-laxity in concentration had sealed their fate. The ball traveled much faster than mortal legs.

Kendrick saw Zachary control the ball beautifully in the midfield. He expertly fetched it from mid-air to the ground and spun around, immediately bolting for the box.

Kendrick watched the boy prodigy leave player after player in the dust like he was walking through an obstacle course of stationary poles.

He didn't dribble with any flamboyance and fancy footwork—but with candid body feints that took him past his opponents as efficiently as possible. As soon as the players became confused by his feints, he would flash past them thanks to his incredible speed, giving them no chance to attempt tackles or intercept the ball.

Zachary soon expertly avoided the last defender and found himself one-on-one with Riga's goalkeeper. Kendrick began celebrating even before the African raised his foot to loop the ball over the goalkeeper who had left his line to greet him. There was little chance of Zachary failing to take advantage of a one-on-one with a keeper. That was why the coach favored him.

2:0. The NF academy had scored their second goal in the 36th minute. Zachary made scoring look easy.

However, Kendrick was aware that such a style-of-play required a combination of body control, game vision, risk analysis, and agility at a high-level. It wasn't easy to put up a display similar to Zachary's.

Kendrick had high hopes the NF academy would finally perform beyond expectations in the annual international cup. All he had to do was defend well, and everything would be okay.

"Come back and defend. Come back and defend." Kendrick shouted at his teammates since they were taking their time celebrating. He had always feared the moments after scoring a goal. The defenders would be excited and at their most vulnerable.

Robin Jatta, one of the NF academy center-backs, ran towards him, grinning like a Cheshire cat. He looked happy beyond measure. "I think we might be able to qualify for the quarter-finals," he said.

"Zachary is turning into a monster with every match. I wonder how he improved his skill by that much over such a short period!"

Kendrick flashed his teammate a half-smile. "I'm not that surprised. He trains almost 16 hours each day."

"Has he ever told you where he trained during his childhood? How did he develop such ball control?"

"Zachary never talks about his childhood. But I've heard he spent his early years in the Congo. But that's enough chit-chat, get back into position and defend." Kendrick said, pushing away the defender.

Chapter 53 - Ahead At Half-Time

The NF academy officials followed the progress of the game closely from the technical area. They were—confined to a marked section close to the touchline, where only substitutes and officials sat during matches.

The academy had sent three coaches, one medic, and an administrative assistant to Riga. They all had specialized roles to fulfill on the team.

Björn Peters was the coach responsible for the physical fitness of the players. He also secretly doubled as a scout to spy on the tactics of the other participants.

He had immediately noticed when the Riga team sealed off ways to pass to Zachary by saddling him with two marking players. Although the action had left their wings short of one attacking player, it looked like a fair tradeoff for them—since it was tiring out Zachary faster than usual.

"Don't you think we should tell Zachary to relax a bit?" He suggested, turning to look at Coach Johansen. "We should not give the other teams a chance to target him before we qualify for the knockout stages. I'm also worried about his stamina since we are playing the day after tomorrow as well."

Coach Johansen kept his sight fixed on the game, which had just restarted, half-smiling. "Do you really believe we can hide him after this match? Just let him be." He shook his head as if he just remembered something. "You know; I checked his agility training results after the Christmas holiday. His improvement is beyond my expectations."

"His running speed has improved once again?" Coach Bjørn asked, without bothering to hide the surprise in his voice.

"Yes. And by quite the margin. His fifty-meter dash now constantly falls between 6 and 7 seconds. If he continues improving at this rate, we could have one of the fastest players in the league before next year." Coach Johansen paused, returning his attention to the game.

NF academy had just won the ball back and was counterattacking again. It seemed like conceding two goals had sealed JFC Riga's fate.

Magnus received the ball in the midfield and passed it to Pål Alseth, NF academy's wingback. Pål controlled it like an expert and advanced through the right-wing, bolting towards the centerline. One of the Riga academy wingbacks ran to intercept him; however, he quickly passed the ball to Magnus—running in sync with him through the midfield.

Magnus received the ball and kicked it to the left-wing where Paul Otterson was lurking. The quick switch from the right to the left side of the pitch left the Riga players disoriented for a few seconds. They didn't react until Paul Otterson had run with the ball for a few yards, spearing deep into the Riga half.

One of the midfielders, marking Zachary, left his side to intercept the winger. Only one player remained close to him. Zachary abruptly increased his pace and ran past the player, heading towards Riga's eighteen-yard box.

Coach Johannsen's only hope was for Paul Otterson to release a well-timed pass that would beat the Riga players and release Zachary into the box.

The Swedish kid did not disappoint. He expertly flipped the ball past his mark into Zachary's path.

Zachary received the ball at the left edge of the box, close to the goal line. He didn't pause to control it. He spun around with the ball hooked to his left foot, shaking-off the defender that had been chasing after him.

He created a couple of yards of space for himself. Only a defender stood between him and the goal. He advanced into the box, doing body feints like a boxer rather than a soccer player. He didn't put any art in his footwork—whatsoever. The Riga defenders and goalkeeper began boogying along with his feints, moving from side to side, like they were doing some kind—of ritualistic dance.

Coach Johansen wondered why the Riga defenders didn't just close down on him instead of making fools out of themselves. The ball was stationary at Zachary's feet, but they wouldn't attack it.

Zachary flicked the ball to his right, ran forward, and made a pass back to Paul Otterson, who was unmarked.

The winger let loose a right-footed shot towards the top right corner of the net from the edge of the box.

Riga's goalkeeper was helpless.

3:0.

The NF Academy had managed to score their 3rd goal in the 44th minute of the gameplay.

Coach Johannsen didn't bother to celebrate. He was already sure his team would win easily against Riga despite their lack of experience. He was only worried about the oncoming matches.

"Did you manage to scout the players of the other teams? Is there anyone we need to worry about in particular?" He asked his assistant.

"I did," Coach Bjørn replied, smiling. "The other teams look quite strong taken as a whole. However, most lack remarkable players who perform above their levels, like Zachary. The only exception is VfB Stuttgart. They have two prodigies." The assistant coach flipped open his notebook.

"The first is a striker called Timo Werner, while the other is a defensive midfielder called Joshua Kimmich." Coach Bjørn continued perusing through his notebook. "One of my friends from Germany told

me those two boys have already participated in several European competitions and performed like stars. There's a chance they'll join senior teams even before they hit 18 years of age."

"Oh!" Coach Johansen arched an eyebrow. "Could they be at the level of Zachary already?"

"Most likely. They also have much more experience in international tournaments."

"Well." Coach Johansen half-smiled. "I guess that will be good for our players, especially Zachary. Playing against boys below his level may make him complacent in the long run. He needs to learn that soccer isn't easy regardless of the advantages afforded him by his talents. That was the main reason why the Rosenborg officials agreed to send him to international competitions."

Coach Bjørn sighed. "But before we think about VfB Stuttgart, we need to handle Genoa in the group stages—and possibly Zenit, Atalanta, or Tottenham in the quarter-finals. I hear that their players have good chemistry."

"I have faith that we'll win and reach the semifinals this time around," Coach Johansen replied confidently. "Hopefully, we can avoid injuries and suspensions before then."

FWEEEEEEE!

The referee blew the halftime whistle, interrupting their discussion.

"Let's head to the dressing room," Coach Johansen intoned, leading the way to the dressing room.

Chapter 54 - Signs Of A Comeback

The atmosphere in the dressing room was anything but somber. It was nothing like any break during a competitive match. Gone was the tension and anxiety the players had felt before the game.

There was chatter among Zachary's teammates, like old friends catching up. Everyone talked in a relaxed manner and made jokes as if they had already won the match.

Zachary was surprised since he knew one could never count matches as won—until the final whistle. Worrisome thoughts looped around in his mind until there was room for nothing else.

There had been many matches in history where teams made comebacks from disadvantages of three goals or more and won. Famously, Liverpool had managed to win the UEFA Champions League final of 2005 after overcoming a three-goal deficit within the second half.

Zachary didn't want to leave the Riga team any chance of pulling off the same trick. He hoped the coach would talk some sense into his teammates before they messed up in the second half.

Paul Otterson came up to him and interrupted his train of thought. "Why do you look worried even when we are three goals ahead? Come and join us. Why are you sitting there in the corner?" He asked while fanning himself with his shirt.

Zachary sighed, shaking his head. He chugged down some water before answering: "I don't like the atmosphere here in the dressing room."

Paul grinned. "Relax. The players know what to do when they get back to the pitch. We might even clinch this one with more than five goals. And here I thought Riga would be a tough opponent since they have the home advantage. They've simply been a letdown." He sighed audibly. Zachary saw that his Swedish flatmate was in a good mood after scoring a goal in the first half. He decided to remain silent and keep his worries to himself.

He'd come to the realization that many players unknown to him in his previous life were performing well in matches. For instance, the captain of the Riga team looked like a phenomenal player. He dribbled, passed, and defended like a first-rate midfielder.

Zachary was worried his teammates' confidence would reduce the team's chances against a Riga squad with such a good player.

The coaches came into the dressing room soon after. Coach Johannsen was in his default somber mood. His assistant Bjorn Peters was all smiles, high-fiving the players and congratulating them upon their performance.

"Quiet," bellowed Coach Johanssen.

All the players ceased their murmurings and focused on the coach who stood before the whiteboard.

"I need all of you to stay focused on the game until the final whistle. We'll maintain the same game strategy for the second half. Just make sure you don't concede..."

The coach laid the approach for the second half while assigning individual roles to all the players. He expounded on the weaknesses he had observed which could be—exploited in the Riga team's formation. Once he finished delivering his talk, he sent the players back to the pitch.

However, Zachary still felt worried about his teammates' mood. They were still behaving as if they had already won the game—even after listening to Coach Johansen's address.

As they exited the dressing room, Zachary approached Magnus, who also served as the assistant captain, to discuss the problem.

"I think the players are overconfident," he began. "I'm worried we will concede unnecessarily at the start of the second half."

Magnus looked around at the rest of the players before replying. "I'll keep on reminding the defenders when we get back on the pitch," he said. "Don't worry. I have your back in the defensive midfield. We only need one more goal to kill their momentum in the second half." He smiled before running to his position.

Zachary sighed and shook his head. He pushed his unease to the back of his mind as he ran to his position.

He resolved to work harder than ever for another goal and seal off Riga's last chance to resurrect. He could not accept anything but a win in the opening match. 2000 Juju-points and a B-grade Agility Enhancing Elixir were at stake. If he managed to complete all the system's milestones, he would improve his stats significantly.

"RIGA, RIGA..."

A chant from the Riga players, in their black jerseys, interrupted his reverie. He looked ahead—towards the other half, and saw the Riga players in a circle yelling slogans to pump themselves up. They looked nothing like a team that was three goals down. The home fans joined in the chant and began clapping, bellowing, and singing. They ended with one final sudden clap that echoed off the walls of the indoor stadium like thunder.

Zachary turned around and saw his teammates, in dark blue jerseys, standing languidly—watching their opponents. Players like Paul Otterson, Robin Jatta, and Kasongo had their arms folded across their chests with smirks outlining their faces. They looked nothing like athletes prepared for a match, but an audience, unresponsive to their opponents.

Zachary sighed as he made last-minute adjustments to his shin guards. He made sure to tighten his shoelaces as well.

The familiar routine calmed his mind and helped him focus wholly on the game. He had a feeling that the second half wouldn't be as easy as the first.

The match restarted after the referee blew his whistle.

Erjan Bakmark, NF academy's lone striker, kicked the ball back to Zachary, stationed right outside the center circle.

The Riga players did not give Zachary any time to think. They ran at him with a hunger befitting their zeal to win the ball back. Zachary passed the ball further-back, to Magnus in the defensive midfield.

"To the right-wing," he hollered, pointing towards the right wingback.

Magnus Blakstad followed his instructions and passed to Yvind Alseth without a pause. The NF academy's number-2 received the ball and hammered it back to Magnus—who kicked it towards Robin Jatta, the left center-back.

However, one of the Riga strikers dashed at the center-back as soon as possible. He was as relentless as a hungry dog chasing after a bone.

Robin played a one-two with Martin Lundal, NF academy's left wingback, at a leisurely pace without waiting for the Riga number-9 to close him down.

The NF academy players continued enjoying a rich spell of possession at the beginning of the second half. For the next ten minutes, they passed the ball slowly but steadily, between their defenders, without any urgency to transition and attack the Riga team's half.

They had yards of space to work with since one of the Riga strikers was—tied up, shielding-off the passing routes to Zachary. The Riga number-10 kept himself positioned between Zachary and anyone with the ball in the defense or the wings.

In the meantime, the other two Riga players, including their captain, shadowed Zachary's every move. They followed him all over the pitch without allowing him a single inch of space to receive the ball.

Zachary could tell that the Riga team's strategy for the second half was to isolate him. Isolation tactics were aimed at sealing off all passing routes to a player to diminish his impact on the game. The Riga players wanted him out of the game. They intended to put a stop to the fast-paced transitions from the defense through him. That way, they would nip NF academy's counters in the bud.

"Use wide areas and wing-play," Zachary heard Coach Johansen yelling from the sidelines. It seemed he had noticed Zachary's predicament and was trying to exploit it.

Isolation also came with some marked disadvantages resulting from assigning three players to keep an eye on a single opponent. There would be gaps left in the defensive shape of the Riga team.

Zachary's tactical awareness let him notice the coach's intention to exploit the gap left by one of the Riga wingers marking him. He only needed to tie up the players and keep them busy, creating yards of space for his teammates. Keeping his marks occupied would leave the Riga formation in tatters, with plenty of gaps for his teammates to exploit.

Zachary was confident in his pace, stamina, and endurance. He could easily take his opponents for a ride around the pitch.

For the next few minutes, he ran around the midfield without pausing to rest. However, his three bodyguards persisted. They continued shadowing his every move as he chased the ball around the pitch. In a way, the Riga team managed to isolate him.

The game proceeded in favor of the NF academy until a slight dip in the concentration of Zachary's teammates started to manifest in their style of play. They still dominated possession, passing the ball from wing to wing without allowing the Riga team players to touch it. However, they lacked the hunger for attacking—a situation brought about by their belief of having already won the game. Such complacency led to some mistakes in the latter part of the second half.

In the 72nd minute, Riga's wingback picked up a misplaced pass from Magnus close to the touchline. The short number-2 bolted like the wind past two of Zachary's teammates, advancing in the right-wing and piercing into NF academy's half. He then sent a teasing cross into the penalty area. His ball-handling was swift and effective, leaving no chance for the defenders to close him down.

Unfortunately for the Riga team, Daniel Kvande (NF academy's number-5) out-jumped all his opponents and comfortably dealt with the cross. He brushed the ball with the top of his head, guiding it a meter over the crossbar. The referee blew the whistle and pointed to the corner flag.

Zachary returned to his box to defend against the corner. The Riga team captain dutifully shadowed him back. The other players that had been marking him remained standing at the edge of the box. However, their attention was still on him rather than their teammate taking the corner. It seemed they were still traumatized by the counterattacks in the first half.

"Kasongo and Paul," he yelled. "Mark the two players outside the box."

Although the two players showed no intent to attack the ball, he didn't want to risk giving them a chance to score.

However, the referee blew the whistle before his flatmates could close-in. The ball was whipped in from the corner by Riga's right wingback.

More than fourteen players within the box pushed and shoved, trying to out-manuever their opponents and win the incoming ball. Magnus, the tall NF academy defensive midfielder, managed to out-jump everyone else. He then headed the dangerous-looking corner ball out of the box.

To Zachary's dismay, the ball flew towards the two unmarked Riga players outside the box.

"Close them down," Zachary shouted as he set-off after it. However, he felt a tug on his shirt that slowed him down. The two players remained unmarked—with all the time in the world to harm the NF academy.

One of the players confidently chested the ball to his side as Zachary tried to close him down. Before the NF academy could react to the danger, he unleashed a volley towards the goal. The ball zoomed past Zachary like a bullet and curled into the top right corner.

3:1. The Riga team had managed to pull back one goal in the 75th minute.

Chapter 55 - Red Mist

The cheers rose into the air like the greatest of celebratory firework explosions. The sounds of the crowd flooded into Zachary, enhancing his dejection.

"Fuck," he couldn't help but swear as he watched the Riga players celebrating. His fears during the half time break were coming to fruition. The Riga team had gained all the momentum they needed for a comeback after scoring their first goal.

"Focus, focus," Coach Johansen bellowed from the sidelines. "Defenders. You need to stay sharp and close down all the spaces," he shouted, waving his arms around like a mad man.

The game restarted. For the next eight minutes, the Riga players took the initiative. They utilized the entire width of the pitch to penetrate the NF academy's half. Their wing-backs made several runs and unleashed several crosses that gave the defenders a hard time.

In the 83rd minute, the Riga captain sent a teasing through-pass into the NF academy's eighteen-yard box. One of the Riga strikers made a run behind the defenders, latched on to the carpet ball, and immediately raised his foot to take a shot towards the goal.

However, Robin Jatta, one of NF academy's center-backs, made an aggressive sliding challenge, sending the striker tumbling to the ground. The referee blew his whistle for a foul.

Zachary winced as he watched the referee make a quick call and point to the penalty spot. It was a big chance for JFC Riga. The cheers and boos from the home fans exploded and filled the air as the referee walked up to Robin Jatta and showed him a direct red card.

The center-back had denied an obvious goal-scoring opportunity to the Riga number-9, an offense punishable with a penalty kick. He was instantly sent-off of the field and forbidden to play for the remainder of the match—leaving the NF academy down to ten men.

As Zachary watched Robin walk off the pitch, he wondered how the game, supposed to be a sure win after the first half, had reached the verge of turning into a loss. He prayed the Riga team captain would miss the penalty, letting the NF academy maintain their two-goal advantage. Otherwise, Zachary and his teammates were in for one hell of a match-ending.

However, the goddess of luck did not seem to be on their side. Dāvis Indrāns, Riga's captain and attacking midfielder, won the battle of wills. He sent an unstoppable penalty past Kendrick Otterson—into the right side of the goal.

3:2.

The Riga team was only one goal down. The cheers of the fans rose to a crescendo, drowning out every other sound from the pitch.

Zachary sighed and habitually turned towards the technical area for instructions. He noticed Coach Johansen yelling and signaling him to come to the touchline.

He did not dawdle. He ran past the celebrating Riga players and reached the coach after a few seconds.

"Zachary," Coach Johannsen began. "I need you to play as a lone striker for the remaining few minutes."

"Ehhh," Zachary exclaimed. He was confused by the coach's instructions since they had just lost a defender. However, the coach wanted him to abandon the midfield and play as a forward—instead of preserving NF academy's one-goal advantage. They risked conceding more goals if they didn't focus their efforts on defending.

The coach smiled when he noticed Zachary's confusion. "Don't worry about the defense. I'm bringing in both Simen Gi?ver and Aleksander Foosn?s. The two of them will handle the midfield and the defense. Aahh! The match has turned into a disaster." He paused, pulling at his red beard in frustration.

Zachary remained silent, waiting for the coach to continue. He was already used to the coach's antics and mood swings. Meanwhile, he stepped into Riga's half of the pitch so that the gameplay would not restart without him. The referee would not allow a kick-off when a player was offside in an opponent's half.

"You need to take the pressure to their half," Coach Johansen continued. "We can take the pressure off our defense if the three players that have been marking you follow you into their defense. If they stay in the midfield, try your best to punish them." He added, his tone conclusive.

Zachary remained stationary before the coach. He was sure that Coach Johansen would have one final instruction since the game was yet to restart. That was his habit.

"One more thing," said the coach, holding on to Zachary's shoulder. "Tell Kendrick to release long balls towards you whenever he takes our goal kicks. It will be upon you to keep their defense on tenterhooks. That is the only way to reduce the pressure on the rest of our players. Understood?"

Zachary nodded while chugging down some water. He also noticed that Coach Bj?rn was standing next to the fourth official registering the substitutes. The two NF academy players had already donned their jerseys and were waiting to enter the pitch. Zachary wondered whether they had gotten the time to warm up.

"Go and do your best," Coach Johannsen slapped his back as he sent him back into the pitch.

Zachary winced at the contact. The coach had a strong swing.

He ran to Kendrick first and whispered the coach's instructions in his ear. He then went around slapping the NF academy players on their backs, encouraging them to stay focused in the final minutes. He was trying to fulfill his role as a captain.

Meanwhile, ?rjan B?rmark and Paul Kasongo trotted off the pitch, giving way for the defensive-minded substitutes. Zachary sprinted towards the center circle to start the game. For a moment, he felt nervous and out of position since he often played behind a few of his teammates. But he took a deep breath and forcefully calmed himself while waiting for the referee's whistle.

FWEEEEEEEE!

The gameplay restarted. Zachary kicked the ball towards Magnus in the defensive midfield before running towards Riga's box without looking back. He positioned himself in-between the two Riga center-backs that were in the process of moving up their defensive line.

The three players that had been marking him were momentarily confused by his actions. They tried to follow him back to their defense. However, their coach's shouts from the sidelines dissuaded them quickly. Zachary was left alone in the company of two center-backs standing on his left and right. Meanwhile, Riga's defensive midfielder moved back a bit—taking on the role of intercepting passes to Zachary.

What followed was a long wait. Zachary watched the Riga team attackers use high-pressing tactics against his teammates, forcing them to lose possession on several occasions.

Dāvis Indrāns, the Riga team captain, was everywhere around NF academy's 18-yard box. He became more active after being freed from his responsibility of marking Zachary. He intercepted balls in midfield and sent teasing passes into the box on several occasions.

However, the NF academy defenders seemed to have woken up from their slumber after conceding two goals. They managed to clear the dangerous balls whenever they entered the box. Riga's chances to score often ended with desperate clearances by Zachary's teammates.

In the 88th minute, Riga's captain came close to scoring. He created a yard of space for himself and tried an effort from outside the box. However, Kendrick Otterson was well-positioned and stretched to push

the ball away from his goal with his fingertips. The ball smashed off the right post and flew back midair towards the outside of the box.

One of the Riga strikers got the rebound just outside the box. But his attempt was blocked by Magnus, taking the sting and power out of the shot.

Kendrick Otterson managed to make a comfortable save before quickly kicking the ball high—towards the center-line where Zachary was waiting with his bodyguards.

Zachary instantly raced towards the ball as it descended to the ground. He could feel two of the Riga team's center-backs shadowing him on his way to the NF academy's half to collect the ball.

He was desperate to relieve his teammates of the pressure they had been facing over the previous few minutes. The only way to do that was to hold the ball for as long as possible.

Chapter 56 - The End Of The Game

Zachary had taken long without touching the ball. So, he found himself curiously eager, carried away by the tide of excitement to perform.

He didn't let the ball bounce—but instead brought it down gently, like he had a magnet in his boots that could attract rubber. His ball control had always ranked among his best skills from childhood. He had been juggling tins and balls woven from banana fibers since he was five, honing his ability to manipulate the ball.

However, the Riga players didn't allow him anytime to deliberate. One of the center-backs, marking him, crushed into his back within a second of his controlling the ball. He applied physical pressure with his body, denying him an opportunity to turn with the ball.

Zachary protected the ball with his body, using his strength graded at A- by the system to keep the defender at bay. Meanwhile, he looked up and noticed that the other Riga players who had been attacking his box were closing-in on him very quickly.

Zachary was stuck between a rock and a hard place. He was surrounded by opponents on all sides—like an island amid an endless sea. The Riga players had him where they wanted him. They would soon box

him in, win possession, and resume their relentless attacks on NF academy's box. That was unless he found a way out of his predicament.

Zachary reached within himself—and an instinctual awareness took over, forcing his body to function on muscle memory and reflexive motions. Adrenaline flooded his system. The movement of the players around him seemed to slow to a crawl. His awareness heightened—and out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Magnus racing towards him, shouting his name.

Zachary smirked and planted his right leg between the ball and the Riga defender—who was increasing the physical pressure to make him lose possession, by the second. Zachary's body was not following any logical thinking—but a set of pre-programmed motions that were stored somewhere deep within his brain.

He drew back his left foot and feinted a pass back down the pitch—towards the approaching Magnus. At that instant, he felt the physical pressure from the defender subside, meaning that his feint had worked.

But instead of passing, Zachary let his foot stop over the ball—and drew it back behind his standing right leg. He then pivoted at the hip, toward his marker, spinning 180 degrees—and shifting his weight to his left foot.

"The Cruyff Turn!" Some of the fans in the stands yelled at the top of their lungs, more or less in unison.

Zachary completed the whole set of motions swiftly and seamlessly, like a fish navigating in water. His mark followed the feint and lost a few yards in-the-time it took him to recover from his slip-up.

Zachary found himself with a yard of space and accelerated towards the left-wing. The other center-back quickly closed him down, trying to bar his path to the Riga team's box.

Zachary continued working by instinct, letting his body flow with the ball instead of thinking about his moves.

He pushed the ball away from himself with the outside of his right boot. He intended to dupe the defender into believing that he was going towards the inside of the pitch. Once the center-back bought

the dummy, Zachary immediately wrapped his foot around the ball and then sped off in the opposite direction.

The Riga defender sat down as if in respect for his dribble.

"An Elastico," Some of the fans shouted. They were on their feet with their necks craned to get a better look at Zachary circumventing the Riga center-back.

Zachary's unexpected elastico dribble took him past his final mark—and all that remained was open space between him and the box. What followed was a race as Zachary shrugged off the chasing players and bolted towards Riga's goal.

He turned the match into a parody of a 100-meter race. The Riga players chased after him with their fists pumping, trying their best to catch up. But Zachary's A+ agility was no joke at the youth level. He left them all in the dust and soon approached the goalkeeper that had come out to greet him.

Zachary expertly flicked the ball around the helpless goalkeeper who remained crawling on the ground after a fruitless attempt to block his advance. Zachary found himself in space before the empty net and unleashed a simple strike towards the goal.

A shadow rushed by him: and it was Riga's defensive midfielder. Zachary was surprised by his speed as he was only a second behind him. He judged that the player's speed must be close to his own.

The defensive midfielder tried his best to slide in and save the ball—but instead, he pushed the ball further into the back of the net.

Zachary had scored his third goal in the 90th minute, completing a hat-trick for the day. He had helped his team regain a two-goal advantage over the Riga team.

4:2.

The stadium instantly went quiet—as if a ghost had passed through the ranks of the home fans. But as Zachary rushed to celebrate with his teammates, the crowds in the stands stood up and gave him a

standing ovation. It didn't seem to matter to them that he had scored against their team. They just applauded the skills of a phenomenal player who had done some jaw-dropping dribbling before whipping the ball into the back of the net.

Intense waves of happiness flooded Zachary's entire being like focused beams of light, piercing through to his soul as he celebrated with his teammates. He lay down on the artificial grass and let the joy soak right into his bones, without bothering about the weight of the other players piling above him.

For the first time in a long while, his mind and body relaxed completely. At that moment, he felt the joy of scoring in a highly contested match. He had never felt such delight in his previous life. He'd made it—he was a winner, on his way to becoming a professional soccer player. His only wish was to have plenty more happy moments in his career.

FWEEEEEEEE!

The referee's whistle interrupted the NF academy celebration. They had to complete the match first before continuing their festivities. But, Zachary was already sure that they would win the game.

Jimmy Edwards was an English scout who hated wasting his time. His bosses had forced him to travel with Tottenham's youth team for the trip to Riga. Although he obeyed, he wasn't happy to spend his February in Latvia. He was jealous of some of his colleagues who had traveled to South America—a continent flooding with talents and—of course, the fine weather.

He lamented the bad luck that had gotten him assigned to the Baltic Region—where he couldn't possibly find talents for the agency. He had already been to some tournaments in Northern and Eastern Europe and failed to find worthwhile players. He had expected the Riga Cup to follow the same trend.

So, he had downloaded three UB-40 albums to his digital Sony Walkman before the opening match. Listening to the music of the legendary British band would get him through what he expected to be a boring opening match. Maybe—probably! To make sure he wasn't disturbed by the noise, he had purchased a set of Sony bass headphones before heading into the indoor stadium to earn his travel allowance.

However, 30 minutes into the game, he had already discarded the headphones—and was busy asking for the name of the player wearing the number-8 shirt of the NF academy team. He no longer looked like a scout that had been forced to the Baltic Region by his agency.

For the entire match, he had watched the highly clinical player take on defenders and score goals. He was mesmerized by his talent—something that hadn't happened to him in a decade. The player was quick on his feet and very clinical. Only his footwork required a bit of work to turn him into another Ryan Giggs or better.

However, his vision and ball control made his conventional footwork seem unnecessary. He could feint, run around defenders, and pass like a Maestro. What if he received training aimed at improving his dribbling skills to match up to the level of his game vision? Jimmy could not help but wonder. He resolved to get his hands on the player by all means.

He turned towards his colleague—an intern who had traveled with him. The intern was a beautiful brunette with hair that tumbled over her shoulders. However, Jimmy found himself stealing more glances at the pitch—than at his gorgeous companion. The game had captured all his attention. He did not wish to miss even a second of the match.

"Can you manage to make contact with him?" He asked. "We need to get to him before the other agencies notice him."

"You're finally taking your work seriously," said Emily Anderson. She did not turn around but continued recording the match with her Nikon Camera. She only managed a response when the game ended with a score of 4:2 in favor of the NF academy.

"I'll try to make contact," she said while straightening her dark brown hair. "But I can't make any promises. Players that talented often have their own agencies even while still in academies. Plus, have you forgotten that you're here as a Tottenham scout, not a representative of the agency?"

Jimmy frowned, mopping a gloved hand through his scruffy brown hair. "Intern," he intoned. "Don't try to explain this to me. I've been in the football industry for the past fifteen years. Every player, agency, or team usually has a price. Your role is to find out that price. Just do your job and get in touch with him. If he has no agent, the better for us."

Emily Anderson flashed his colleague a soft smile before replying: "I'll get right to it."

Chapter 57 - Coach Johansen's Post-Match Team Talk

After the game, Zachary received the match ball from the officials since he had scored a hat-trick. He felt a surge of happiness enveloping him since he had taken the first step towards completing the system mission.

He recalled the final minutes of the game when he had executed the Cruyff turn and Elastico dribble. He had been in a state of complete harmony with the ball, like never before in both his lives. That seemed to be the reason he had been able to execute skills he'd only practiced in his past life. He made a mental note to investigate that state of mind further during his next game.

There were no post-match interviews in the Riga Cup. So, Zachary and his teammates trekked silently back to the dressing room. They had expended all their stamina reserves, defending against the Riga team's relentless attacks in the final minutes.

When they got to the dressing room, they found Coach Johansen in a somber mood. There was a tension in his manner conveyed by the tightness of his face. His brows were creased. His eyes, rigid and cold. His mere presence seemed to chill the air in the dressing room. He immediately directed his glare at the NF academy players once they entered.

Robin Jatta was seated at the other end of the dressing room with his face covered by his two hands. Zachary walked up to him and patted his shoulder. "We won the game," he said to the center-back before settling down beside him to remove his match attire. He didn't want his teammate to remain saddled with guilt, thinking he'd sealed his team's downfall. Zachary could not help but wonder why Coach Johansen hadn't bothered to inform the defender about their win.

The center-back turned towards him, managing a small smile. "Thank you," he whispered back, looking more relaxed.

"No need to worry," Zachary continued, his voice barely a whisper. "In this tournament, you'll only be suspended for two games. You can return to the team in the quarter-finals."

He tried his best to raise his dejected teammate's spirits as he changed into his dark blue tracksuit. Coach Johansen maintained his silence, waiting for the players to finish changing their outfits.

All the players, except Zachary and Robin, had quit their murmuring. They were smart enough to realize that the coach was disappointed in their second-half performance.

"That was a truly terrible second half," intoned Coach Johansen, breaking the silence. A cryptic laugh, uncharacteristic of him, accompanied his words.

All the players in the dressing room maintained their silence, waiting for him to continue.

"You played a good game in the first half," Coach Johansen continued, his voice flat without any emotion. "You managed to keep all their attackers away from our box—and the whole team maintained a high level of discipline and focus. Can anyone tell me what happened in the second half?" He paused, letting his gaze roam over all the players in the dressing room.

None of the players bothered to answer since they'd long gotten accustomed to his rhetorical questions.

The coach shook his head and sighed. "I've always emphasized the importance of staying sharp until the end of the game. You have to stay focused, whether you're winning or losing. Any lapse in concentration will lead to mistakes like the ones in the game today. And, when you begin making mistakes, the inevitable conclusion is a loss..."

Coach Johansen's words came out of his mouth like bullets from the muzzle of a machine gun. He lectured them about the importance of maintaining focus during games for the following 15 minutes. He pointed out several incidents during the match where a failure in concentration could have given Riga opportunities to win the game.

Zachary could tell that the coach was trying his best to drill the message into the players' heads in the shortest time possible. He repeated himself several times, giving examples of how different tight situations in the match—could have been avoided. He only stopped his talk when Coach Bjørn informed him that the next team was about to come into the dressing room.

The coach glanced at his watch before adding a few concluding remarks. "Let me end by asking you this: Do you know what would have happened if you had lost the opening match? A match in which you were already ahead by three goals in the first half!" His tone had turned soft.

He started moving around the dressing room, gazing at each player as he spoke. "You would not be happy with yourself because you lost the game. You would feel nothing except dejection for the next few days—and would find it hard to perform at your best in the next series of games. Our tournament would likely have ended right there. Then, you would be filled with regret and have nothing to show for all your hard work."

"Is that what you want?" Coach Johansen asked, his voice rising a little.

The players remained silent, under the impression it was one of his rhetorical questions.

"Answer me," he bellowed, his voice tinged with rage.

"No, coach," all the players answered more or less in unison.

Coach Johansen sat back on one of the tables, smiling softly. "I hope everyone on this team understands that we're here to win the tournament," he said, his voice hushed. Nonetheless, it still carried on to every corner of the room.

"To win a tournament, we need dedication. You have to play every single match like a final. You have to do your best in every second of the game until you hear the final whistle. That's whether you're ahead or losing. And, that's the only way we can stand a chance of contesting this cup." He emphasized the last sentence.

"Remember, we are what we repeatedly do. Playing well in matches is not an act but a habit developed over a period. We have to hone this habit of playing like champions until it becomes part of us. That's how we become greats in football. That's the only way to become great players that can compete in professional leagues. Otherwise, you'll forever remain amateurs or pretenders. Are we clear?"

All the players nodded. Some of the players had their fists balled, their eyes glittering—like they couldn't wait to play the next game. Zachary was glad the coach had delivered such a stirring address right after the match. The message seemed to have hit home.

Coach Johansen smiled. "Let this match be a lesson to you all. I don't want to see any sort-of foolery in the game against BK Frem on Wednesday morning." His tone was somber.

"We'll meet again tomorrow in the morning for gym work. I expect all of you in the hotel lobby by 8 in the morning. We'll leave by bus and train at one of the gyms in the city. But today, I expect you to watch the match between Genoa and BK Frem. Those are our immediate competitors in this group. They are tough nuts to crack, but we have to face them and still win." Coach Johansen added in a conclusive tone.

Chapter 58 - Travelling Fans

Zachary and his teammates left the dressing room after Coach Johansen's address. They passed by the VfB Stuttgart and Skonto Academy players in the hallways as they exited the pitch. The two teams were—slated to play in the next game.

The NF Academy squad joined the small crowd of home fans leaving the stadium. Several people craned their necks to look at Zachary. Others yelled in a language he didn't understand. But, he could tell they were trying to talk to him. It seemed he had gained some measure of fame among the fans of JFC Riga.

Zachary maintained a polite smile and continued moving along with the crowd. Each person in the troop of fans moved forward as if dragged by unseen hands.

Before long, Zachary and his teammates exited the indoor stadium.

At the gate, he was surprised to run into Marta Romano and her twin sister, Melissa. They were standing among a group of his classmates from the Trøndelag International School. Most were either Italians or Spaniards that were part of the international programs at his school.

"You guys are here!" Paul Otterson was the first to run forward to greet the entourage. "Aren't you supposed to be attending classes?" The Swede asked, looking at the group of ten from Trondheim.

"We wouldn't miss this tournament for anything," Melissa replied, smiling. Like her sister, she was—dressed in a stylish knee-length overcoat that obscured most of her gorgeous figure. "We arrived

yesterday morning to give you some support here in the cup. As international students, we look out for our own." She added.

Paul grinned, hooking an arm across Melissa's shoulder. "That's great. The tournament will be a lot more fun with you guys around. Did you watch the match?" The Swede asked, his eyes darting from person to person in the group.

"We watched it. You guys were great." Melissa paused, turning her gaze towards Zachary. "I never knew you could play like that. You're really good at hiding your skills. Why aren't you playing for the Rosenborg team?" She asked, creasing her brow.

Zachary's left shoulder lifted in a casual shrug. He looked around and noticed that the rest of his classmates were looking at him in awe. It seemed they had also been impressed by his performance.

"Hello, everyone," he greeted them, trying his best to change the topic of conversation. He disliked being the center of attention whenever he was off the pitch. "It's good to see you. It's always nice to have some home support whenever we play."

His classmates returned the greeting, nodding in the process. Marta Romano winked at him when they shook hands. He mouthed the word 'later' and started looking about him, ignoring the chatter between the Ottersons, Kasongo, and the rest of his classmates. He walked to the side and started observing the rest of his teammates.

Most NF academy players were either greeting their parents or siblings who had traveled to support them in Riga. They exchanged hugs and sweet nothings—or whatever topics that made them laugh and grin from ear to ear, as Zachary watched on. Even the always-somber Coach Johansen was busy talking to his wife and daughter, seemingly having forgotten about the Genoa match that was about to begin. Everyone was happy that their families had traveled a long way to cheer them on.

At such moments, Zachary wished he had known his parents. He had never gotten the opportunity to see them in both his lifetimes.

Zachary felt like a juvenile, thinking about the issue, but there was not much he could do to push away the yearning. He resolved to have a serious talk with his grandma about his parents when he returned to Congo after going pro.

Marta Romano silently left the other group of his friends and stood by his side. "A penny for your thoughts," she said.

"Just thinking about life—and the next game," he replied with a smile, forcing himself to focus on the Italian. "I was surprised you came here with your sister. I never took you for a fan of soccer, like your sister." He added, diverting the topic.

Zachary had been under the impression she wasn't interested in soccer. Unlike her sister, she never bothered to watch Rosenborg's matches at Lerkendal, even when free match tickets were available.

Marta smiled softly. "I didn't come here for the football, but to watch you play. It seems you've been avoiding me since we returned from the Christmas holidays. What's up with that?" Her Italian accent colored her words.

Zachary sighed. "I've been busy preparing for the tournament. We haven't had time for classes or anything else." He paused, casting a casual glance around him. "And now, I have to go back to the hotel and shower, then watch the match between our next two opponents."

Zachary inclined his head to get a better look at the Italian. Marta was a beautiful girl with black hair woven into long braids, plunging over her shoulders. She had a long nose that was a perfect match with her deep black intelligent eyes.

"But, we can meet and talk on Friday," Zachary said. "That's the free day after our last group match. Is that okay with you?"

"It's a date then." Marta smiled. "Should I expect a tour around the city or something else?"

"Possibly," Zachary replied. "But I have to go now. Or my coach won't be pleased."

He had noticed that the bus had already arrived at the gate. Coach Johansen had already finished saying his goodbyes to his family. He was standing next to the bus, waiting for the players to wind-up their interactions. Coach Bjørn was moving around, telling everyone to get on to the bus as soon as possible.

Marta smiled. "Okay. Remember to text me the time of our date. I'll be waiting. And, good luck in your next game. I'll be rooting for you in the stands."

Zachary, his teammates, and the coaches took the bus to the Monika Centrum Hotel. They quickly cleaned up and changed into new tracksuits in their rooms. Twenty minutes later, they were already in the Olympic Sports Center. They sat in the stands, among a few fans, watching the match between Genoa and BK Frem.

The match was a one-sided affair, with the Genoa Youth team dictating play. They attacked the Danish team from the first minute, with their wingers and midfielders making multiple attempts, at goal, within the first few minutes. Their team chemistry was perfect. It seemed they had been playing together for a long time.

They were—arrayed in a 4-3-3 formation with no marked weakness showing in their style of play. Genoa's typical defense of two center-backs and two full-backs managed to stop the BK Frem players from making many shots on goal.

The Italian team played with three central midfielders who would occasionally form triangles and play with quick touches, transitioning from the defense to the striking. They conquered and dominated the midfield and sealed off most of BK Frem's chances.

Genoa's attacking force consisted of three strikers, a central one and two who played on the flanks. The two strikers on the sides were all-round attacking players with good pace and shooting ability, often using their speed on the wings to cut in towards the goal. The central striker was a powerful target man—and sometimes dropped deep into the box to drag defenders away and leave space for the wide forwards to score.

In the 13th minute, the Genoa number-11 managed to dribble from the wing and score the first goal. In the 20th minute, the central striker latched on to a cross inside the six-yard box and netted the second goal. Six minutes later, the third striker scored another goal.

Zachary watched—attentively as Genoa scored goal after goal throughout the one-sided match. The tall Genoa central striker quickly pulled off a hat-trick while the other forwards on the flanks got a brace each. By the 80th minute, Genoa was seven goals ahead of the BK Frem team. The Danish team had yet to put one in the back of the net.

"Genoa will be a tough opponent," Kendrick, seated on the right of Zachary, commented. "We have to find a way to freeze their two wingers to win. Otherwise, we'll suffer the same fate as BK Frem." He added, shaking his head.

"We must win the game against BK Frem to qualify for the knockouts," Zachary intoned. "I don't want to risk playing Genoa without six points in the bag." The Genoa team was good with a well-balanced squad that almost had no weaknesses.

"I'm not worried about BK Frem," Kendrick said, smiling. "Look at them. They have not gotten any shots on target since the game began. Do you think we could lose against such a team?"

Zachary creased his brow, turning to the side to gaze at his friend. "Kendrick," he intoned, his tone somber. "Are you forgetting what just happened to us in the second half? You can never be sure of winning a game until you have dominated the other side. Otherwise, betting companies would have run bankrupt ages ago. Do you remember the game between Senegal and France in the 2002 World Cup? Or Greece versus Portugal in the Euros?" He asked, locking gazes with his flatmate.

Kendrick was about to reply, but their conversation was interrupted by a sweet feminine voice originating from Zachary's left side. "Hello, Zachary. Can I have your autograph?"

Zachary was surprised. He had only played a single game in Riga. It was a shock that someone was already asking for his autograph. He wasn't Messi or anyone famous—yet. He looked to the side and saw the delicate face of a beautiful young woman. Her blue eyes, like the sea, were calm and emotionless. She had long, wavy dark brown hair—so smooth and silky, almost as if tailored from fabric.

"Who are you?" Zachary managed a reply after a few seconds. However, his voice came out an octave higher than intended.

The lady smiled, her eyes gaining and exuding a slight warmth. "I'm Emily Anderson. And, I think I'm your biggest fan." She spoke in a classic British accent—like a BBC news anchor. "Won't you give me that autograph and maybe have a cup of coffee with me?"

Zachary remained silent, frowning. He could feel Kendrick pocking his right side when he delayed giving the lady a reply. "Bro," he whispered. "What are you waiting for? She won't kidnap you in broad

daylight. You're much stronger than her—for God's sake. Just say yes. I'll inform the Coach that you just returned to the hotel to rest."

"I promise I'm not a con woman," the lady cut in. "And, I've got a lot of info about each of the teams participating in the Riga Cup. We can talk solely about football over coffee. No need to get flustered." She added, smiling softly.

"You see," Kendrick chipped in. "A cup of coffee is good for relaxation after a hectic game like the one we just played today morning."

Zachary first looked back at the pitch before answering. Team Genoa had just scored their eighth goal of the game. They were leading the group due to their remarkable goal difference of eight goals. There was nothing left to see in the game.

Zachary returned his attention to the woman. He could tell that she wasn't anything like a fangirl, following a star to get an autograph. She looked more like an office type, calculating, and good at dealing with people.

He decided to head out with her and hear what she had to say. He had a feeling he would regret rejecting the meeting.

"Okay," he said to the lady. "Let's go get some coffee."

He first told Kendrick to cover for him before leading the way out of the indoor stadium.

Chapter 59 - A Meeting With An Agent

Zachary took a sip of the coffee. A fleeting expression of satisfaction showed on his face—and soon, he was smiling broadly. He glanced down at the thick ceramic mug, slightly warm to touch. It had preserved the heat, making the drink perfect in the cold weather.

"So, can you tell me why you wanted to talk to me?" Zachary inquired, locking gazes with Emily Anderson. They sat in a cozy coffee shop, about a kilometer and a half away from the Olympic Sports Center. The rich deep brown cafe tables and the dark aroma of the served-coffee created a relaxing atmosphere.

Emily Anderson smiled softly. "Didn't I just say that I'm your biggest fan," she said, pouting a bit. She seeped on her coffee before adding: "Honestly, I need your autograph. Let me get a sharpie for you."

Zachary creased his brow as she fished around in her handbag for a few seconds before handing him a permanent marker. "Will you give me an autograph?" She drawled, looking at him pleadingly with her deep, intelligent eyes.

"Is this one of those pranks I always see on reality television shows?" He inquired but took the marker from her outstretched hand. "Where do I sign?" He looked at her skeptically, watching for any signs of whether she was playing a joke on him.

But the next actions of the lady surprised him. She took off her white cashmere scarf and handed it to him. "Make the autograph as large as possible," she said, smiling, her expression emphasizing her beauty. "I would like to hang it on one of my walls when I go back home."

Zachary nodded. He had nothing to lose by signing on the scarf. Moreover, Zachary did not use his legal signature for the autograph. He simply wrote out his two names on it and handed it back to her.

"Thank you," Emily said, admiring the overly-large letters on the scarf. She looked like a famous art critic admiring the Mona Lisa in the Louvre. The emotion in her eyes was fathoms deep—yet they carried the warmth and life of the sunlit surface.

Zachary looked at the lady, wide-eyed and mouth slightly agape, as she folded the scarf carefully, like a piece of art, and shoved it into her handbag. Her actions were getting more bizarre by the second. She had only seen him play in a single match—against Riga. His performance couldn't have been enough to convince her he would become a star in the future. Yet, there she was—asking for his autograph and behaving like an infatuated fan girl.

"Don't look at me like that," Emily intoned as if she could see right into his mind. "I'm sure this cloth will be quite expensive a few years from now." She added, her voice calm and confident.

Zachary smiled. He admitted to himself that giving out an autograph had pleased him to some extent.

He shook his head, taking his focus off the lady. For a few moments, he just wrapped his hands around the ceramic coffee mug before him, letting the warmth flow to his fingers, banishing the wintry chill. He then took several bites off a Crumble Cake and seeped on the coffee. The combination was delicious, especially after all the energy he'd expended during the match with Riga.

"So, Zachary," the lady began. "Do you have an agent?"

"Not at the moment," Zachary replied honestly.

Emily flashed him a smile. "I work for CAA Base Limited—a reputable agency for professional footballers dedicated to shaping the ongoing development and management of their careers. At the agency, we work in teams to support our clients on and off the pitch." She paused, locking gazes with Zachary. "I'm here to recruit you as a client." Her tone was formal.

"Oh," Zachary said, nodding. He'd guessed as much. "Where is your agency based?" He inquired.

The lady had been straightforward with him. He decided to do the same since he knew little about the sports agencies in the world. He needed more information about the organization that wanted to represent him.

A slight smile twisted on her lips. "Our head offices are in London, but we represent players from many parts of the world. We're one of the leading sports agencies in Europe. You could easily check our company profile on the internet. We represent famous players like Ashley Young and Aaron Lennon, among others."

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She sounded a bit desperate. Nonetheless, Zachary waited for her to continue as he munched on his Crumble Cake. She needed to recruit him, not the other way round. He could afford to be willful, to some extent. That was one way of testing her credibility as a sports agent.

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"Yes." Emily nodded. "I haven't signed any player yet. As you can see from my CV, I only graduated last year. I'm just an intern at the CAA Base Limited. I need promising clients as soon as possible. Or else my career will be on the line. But don't worry. I'm a hard worker and a quick learner. If you select me as your agent, I'll represent you to the best of my abilities."

"I believe that you'll be getting many contract offers after this tournament," Emily continued. "If I became your agent, I would help you negotiate them to achieve the best possible outcome."

"I would be able to secure the most lucrative endorsement and sponsorship deals with companies like Nike and Sony in the long run. I would also be in charge of organizing your TV, radio, and digital media appearances. I would do my best to help you build a perfect public image while also managing your schedules. You would only need to play football without worrying about anything else."

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"You're still a minor," Emily intoned, favoring him with a slight smile. "We are not supposed to take money from you. Our deal only binds you to our agency for the four years after you turn into an adult."

"Oh," Zachary nodded, enlightened. "I guess we should end the negotiations for now. I promise to look through this contract in detail and consult some of my people tonight. If what you say is credible, there will be no harm in working with you. I'll inform you of my decision tomorrow evening." He said firmly, his tone conclusive.

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Zachary headed back to his hotel room after the meeting. He realized that Kasongo had not yet returned from watching the match between Genoa and BK Frem.

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An hour later, he called back. His message: "Sign the contract."

Chapter 59 - A Meeting With An Agent

Zachary took a sip of the coffee. A fleeting expression of satisfaction showed on his face—and soon, he was smiling broadly. He glanced down at the thick ceramic mug, slightly warm to touch. It had preserved the heat, making the drink perfect in the cold weather.

"So, can you tell me why you wanted to talk to me?" Zachary inquired, locking gazes with Emily Anderson. They sat in a cozy coffee shop, about a kilometer and a half away from the Olympic Sports Center. The rich deep brown cafe tables and the dark aroma of the served-coffee created a relaxing atmosphere.

Emily Anderson smiled softly. "Didn't I just say that I'm your biggest fan," she said, pouting a bit. She seeped on her coffee before adding: "Honestly, I need your autograph. Let me get a sharpie for you."

Zachary creased his brow as she fished around in her handbag for a few seconds before handing him a permanent marker. "Will you give me an autograph?" She drawled, looking at him pleadingly with her deep, intelligent eyes.

"Is this one of those pranks I always see on reality television shows?" He inquired but took the marker from her outstretched hand. "Where do I sign?" He looked at her skeptically, watching for any signs of whether she was playing a joke on him.

But the next actions of the lady surprised him. She took off her white cashmere scarf and handed it to him. "Make the autograph as large as possible," she said, smiling, her expression emphasizing her beauty. "I would like to hang it on one of my walls when I go back home."

Zachary nodded. He had nothing to lose by signing on the scarf. Moreover, Zachary did not use his legal signature for the autograph. He simply wrote out his two names on it and handed it back to her.

"Thank you," Emily said, admiring the overly-large letters on the scarf. She looked like a famous art critic admiring the Mona Lisa in the Louvre. The emotion in her eyes was fathoms deep—yet they carried the warmth and life of the sunlit surface.

Zachary looked at the lady, wide-eyed and mouth slightly agape, as she folded the scarf carefully, like a piece of art, and shoved it into her handbag. Her actions were getting more bizarre by the second. She had only seen him play in a single match—against Riga. His performance couldn't have been enough to convince her he would become a star in the future. Yet, there she was—asking for his autograph and behaving like an infatuated fan girl.

"Don't look at me like that," Emily intoned as if she could see right into his mind. "I'm sure this cloth will be quite expensive a few years from now." She added, her voice calm and confident.

Zachary smiled. He admitted to himself that giving out an autograph had pleased him to some extent.

He shook his head, taking his focus off the lady. For a few moments, he just wrapped his hands around the ceramic coffee mug before him, letting the warmth flow to his fingers, banishing the wintry chill. He then took several bites off a Crumble Cake and seeped on the coffee. The combination was delicious, especially after all the energy he'd expended during the match with Riga.

"So, Zachary," the lady began. "Do you have an agent?"

"Not at the moment," Zachary replied honestly.

Emily flashed him a smile. "I work for CAA Base Limited—a reputable agency for professional footballers dedicated to shaping the ongoing development and management of their careers. At the agency, we work in teams to support our clients on and off the pitch." She paused, locking gazes with Zachary. "I'm here to recruit you as a client." Her tone was formal.

"Oh," Zachary said, nodding. He'd guessed as much. "Where is your agency based?" He inquired.

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