

Greatest 111

Chapter 111 - The Norwegian Football Cup Serial Challenge

Coach Johansen sighed, leaning back in his chair. "Okay, have it your way," he said. "You can keep on fighting for numbers in the midfield. But remember, you're competing with very experienced players. So, it won't be a walk in the park for you."

"I understand," Zachary replied solemnly. "I'm more than ready to compete for a spot in the midfield."

He had just learned the Zinedine-Pirlo Mental Juju. If he continued improving his mastery of the skill, he was sure he would surpass the top midfielders in the Tippeligaen in no time. As long as the coach gave him playing time in a few matches, he was sure he would acquire a spot as one of the Rosenborg starting midfielders. He had no intention of changing his playing position just to make the team.

"Okay, I like your conviction," said Coach Johansen, nodding. "Let's wait and see how you perform in Wednesday's game against Strindheim. I shouldn't be dumping any pressure on your shoulders before your debut game, but I feel I need to remind you of a few things."

The coach planted his elbows on the desk and looked at Zachary pensively. "Remember, you'll get few other chances to showcase your skills on the first team. If you put up a dull performance, it will be quite hard for you to get another opportunity."

"You must have already felt it. The atmosphere in the first team is quite different from that of the academy. The fans, the coaches, and even your teammates won't give you chances if they feel like you're just going to make them lose games. That's why first impressions are everything. The better you perform in your first game, the easier it'll be for you later on. So, try to do your best in that game."

"I'm not asking you to play like Ronaldinho or Messi," he continued, the words coming out of his mouth softly but steadily. "I only need you to do your part on the team. Go for a simple approach and release the ball as quickly as possible. Don't try to put on any showy displays, like making runs from the defensive midfield to the opponent's box. If you do that, you'll simply be seeking injuries in your debut game. We can't have that."

"Remember, you are no longer in the academy. You're now playing at the professional stage. Defenders are—paid highly to stop opponents from attacking their goals. So they'll do everything in their power to

stop you, in case you dribble a lot. That's why I'm imploring you to play simple football in your debut game. If you do the opposite, you'll most likely blunder, and that's where the problems will begin."

"Understood?"

"Yes, coach."

Coach Johansen narrowed his eyes and stared at Zachary intently. His overgrown red beard made him all the more imposing despite his gangly physique.

"I have seen a few talented players graduate with flying colors from the academy but mess up in their first season. They all have one thing in common—they try to play like Zidane or Ronaldinho when they don't have the necessary experience. Most of them would have done better if they played simple football of passing—giving and going. But because they try to do more than necessary, they keep on blundering and wasting chances—until all the fans and coaches lose confidence in them."

"Zachary, I'm urging you, again and again, don't follow the same trend," the coach said sternly. "Are we clear?"

"Yes, coach," Zachary replied, his tone humble. "I understand and will strictly follow your advice."

The negative thoughts about his coach that had recently taken root in his psyche vanished instantly. From that single conversation, he could feel that the coach deeply cared about his progress as a player. He had called him to his office and warned him about all the pitfalls to avoid in his debut game. Zachary felt very grateful to him.

He had suffered similar pitfalls during the debut game of his previous life. He had intended to show off his skills while playing his first game for TP Mazembe—but had messed up in the process. He didn't want to go through a similar situation in his new life. So, he would follow the coach's instructions to the letter.

"Okay, you can leave," the coach said, with the air of seeing a visitor out. "Don't forget to go for your last medical. If possible, do it today or tomorrow. We don't want anything to stop your debut now."

"Yes, coach," Zachary said, standing up. "Thank you for giving me an opportunity on the starting eleven. And thank you for your valuable advice." He added before walking out of the door.

After leaving the coach's office, Zachary headed to the canteen right away. He quickly ate his lunch before leaving Lerkendal.

It was only half-past noon. So, there were still three hours left to the start of the training session that evening. Zachary wanted to use those three hours to rest and regain his stamina. That way, he would perform his best during the training. He didn't want to mess up after already making it onto the squad.

So, he boarded a bus and headed to his apartment in Stj?rdalsveien without further ado. Thirty minutes later, he was safely in the confines of his living room. He couldn't resist the temptation to open the system interface much longer. He was itching to learn about the new system mission details.

"System," he mumbled, lying down on his bed. "Bring out the information on the new system mission."

"Command received," the apathetic feminine voice of the system AI sounded in his mind right away.

"Mission details have been displayed on the interface."

Zachary blinked as his eyes adjusted to the contents of the translucent bluish screen that appeared before him. He then started reading the mission details.

G.O.A.T MISSIONS

#NEW MISSION: 2013 Norwegian Football Cup Serial Challenge

->The system has detected that the user is part of the Rosenborg BK squad partaking in the 2013 Norwegian Football Cup, commonly referred to as the Cupen. The system has designed an associated mission for the event.

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

*Milestone 1: Play all matches in the Cupen. The user must be part of the starting eleven or a playing substitute for every tournament match.

*Milestone 2: Help your teammates win the finals and become the champions of the Cupen.

*Milestone 3: Provide the most assists in the Cupen.

*Milestone 4: Become the top scorer in the Cupen.

*Milestone 5: Become the MVP of the Cupen.

*Rewards:

->Milestone 1 completion reward: 1000 Juju-points

->Milestone 2 completion reward: 1500 Juju-points

->Milestone 3 completion reward: 3000 Juju-points

->Milestone 4 completion reward: 4500 Juju-points

->Milestone 5 completion reward: Three-Month dosage of A-grade Physical Conditioning Elixir.

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

*Accept *Reject

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

->Minus 15000 Juju-points

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

*Remarks: The role of a genius is not to complicate the simple but to simplify the complicated. And only geniuses have the potential to become the G.O.A.T.

After reading through the mission details, Zachary didn't click on the accept button right away as he'd always done on previous instances. Instead, he took some time to deliberate whether completing the various milestones was feasible.

Firstly, he wasn't sure if he would be in the match squads of all Rosenborg's fixtures in the Norwegian Cup. Even if he played well, the coaches could still decide to rotate the players at any time—and then he would fail the mission. Secondly, although Rosenborg was one of the Norwegian football giants, they could still fail to win the cup. In the previous year, Molde had easily knocked them out of the Cupen in the fourth round.

Zachary was only sure that he could complete the third milestone, which needed him to provide the most assists in the Cupen. With the Zinedine-Pirlo Mental Juju in his skills repertoire, he would find it easy to unleash defense-splitting passes that would turn into goals. But completing the milestone also depended on whether his team progressed further in the tournament. If it so happened that his team got knocked out of the Cupen in the second round, he would still fail even if he averaged three assists per game. The last two milestones were even harder to complete since he had just entered the Rosenborg first team. Becoming the top scorer or MVP required a good deal of luck and help from a player's team. Only established and experienced star players on top team squads usually had the chance to realize such accomplishments.

"Oh, whatever," Zachary mumbled to himself and pressed the accept button after a few more seconds of deliberation.

He was a gambler by nature—a habit picked up in the bad years of his previous life. If he failed, he would merely have to look for a way to pay the 15,000 Juju-points owed. But if he completed a single milestone, he would win a lot of Juju points right away. He would be one step closer to upgrading the system and learning another G.O.A.T skill. So, he decided to bite the bullet and accept the mission even if he couldn't guarantee he would achieve the minimum of a single milestone necessary to escape the penalty.

"DING"

"The user has accepted the mission: 2013 Norwegian Football Cup Serial Challenge."

"User data updated successfully."

After Zachary finished accepting the mission, he set an alarm clock for 3:00 PM. He didn't want to miss the training that evening. He closed his eyes and entered slumberland—dreaming of himself scoring goals in one of the Tippeligaen matches.

Chapter 112 - To The Ruta Arena I

Wednesday, May 1, 2013.

It was half-past four in the evening, only an hour and a half to the start of the Norwegian Football Cup second-round game between Rosenborg BK and Strindheim IL.

Zachary stood among the other Rosenborg players in the Lerkendal Idresspark parking lot, waiting to board the bus to Ruta Arena—the home ground of Strindheim Idrettslag. Like the rest of his teammates, he was clad in a full all-black designer suit and sleek, gentle shoes—looking like he was heading to a classy wedding dinner rather than a football game.

He didn't like the stuffy attire in the slightest. He preferred casual wear much more. However, he had still readily donned it since it was the sporting director's mandate for every player to be in their suits before the game. Wearing the outfit was a small price to pay to participate in the match. In his previous life, he would have even put on a dress if it could have guaranteed him a spot among the regulars of a pro football team in Europe.

Two days had passed since Zachary first learned he would be in the starting line-up for the next Rosenborg fixture. However, he still felt like he was walking on clouds.

He couldn't help it. He was very excited to play his debut game as a professional footballer in Europe.

Filled with anticipation and jitters, he didn't want to talk much. Instead, he kept on checking his backpack—the boots and their studs, check; the shin guards, check; the ankle guards—

Bzzt Bzzzt! Bzzt Bzzzt!

His phone vibrated while he was still rummaging through the contents of the bag. He fished it out of the side pocket of his coat and glanced at the screen. It was his grandma calling. So, he pressed the accept button right away.

"Habari, bibi," he said, placing the phone next to his ear.

"Hello, Zachary," she replied in the same Swahili language. "How are you?"

"I'm okay, grandma," Zachary replied humbly. "Didn't we talk the day before yesterday? Why are you calling now when I already informed you that I would be playing a match today?" He was so used to his grandma that words came out naturally without needing to think much. With her, he didn't need to put up his guard and could easily express himself without any worries.

"Can't I 'simply' call to say hello to my grandson?" She asked, her voice rising slightly. "Are you starting to feel sweet because you no longer live here with me? The next time I see you, I'll pull those ears of yours." She added jokingly.

"Don't say that, grandma," he said, taking a casual glance around him. He noticed that some of his teammates had already cast curious glances towards him since he was speaking a very exotic language. So, he walked a few steps away from the rest before speaking into the phone once again. "Grandma, no more joking around. We'll be starting the match soon. Can we talk later?"

"Yes, we can talk later," she replied, her tone softening. "I only called to wish you luck in your game. But now that you're doing well in Europe, always remember to remain humble. That way, you'll continue to progress in your career. And please remember to pray before the game."

"Thank you, grandma," Zachary replied, smiling ruefully. "I'll do that." He couldn't remember the last time he engaged in any praying. But to assure his grandma and keep her from worrying, he answered positively.

"But Zachary," his grandma continued, her voice becoming more solemn. "When are you planning to come back and visit us? You know that it has already been more than two years since you left."

"Why are you asking me this once again? Didn't I already promise that I would be returning at the beginning of June? That's the only time when I'll get a few days off from the team."

"Fine," she said, her voice softening once again. "I hope you keep your promise. I'll be waiting for you next month. So, don't disappoint me."

"Okay, grandma," Zachary said humbly. "But, I've to go now. My match will be starting soon."

"Just a moment. One more thing, Zachary."

"Yes, grandma," Zachary replied after taking a cursory glance around the parking lot and noticing that his teammates were yet to begin boarding the bus.

"Are you still studying?"

"Grandma, as I previously informed you, I've already finished secondary school. So, I've decided to take a break and concentrate on my training at the moment. You know that I have to stay focused if I wish to stay on the team. So, I can't be doing too many things at once. But, I'll apply for university in about a year or two. So, don't worry, grandma."

"I've heard that you can choose to study in the evening when you're at university. Why can't you apply for such a course then? That way, you can play your football and study at the same time."

"Grandma," Zachary said pleadingly. "Can we talk about this later? My match is really about to begin. Okay, grandma?"

"Okay, Zachary. May the Lord give you many blessings. I wish you the best in your match. Bye."

"Bye. I'll also be sending you some more airtime at the end of the week. If anything else comes up, you can talk to Coach Damata."

"Okay, but try to save part of your money. Don't keep sending money to me. I'm doing well here."

"Okay, grandma, Bye. Have a good day." Zachary sighed, ending the call. Over the past half a year, his grandma had been calling nearly every week, asking him when he would be returning to DR Congo to visit her. However, Zachary had always been training, trying to improve his skills as fast as possible. He hadn't even returned home a single time since his arrival in Norway. He felt guilty whenever he talked to his grandma because of that.

For school, he had followed Kristin's advice and applied for the German and Spanish language courses. But he hadn't mentioned that to his grandma at that moment. Otherwise, she would have spent more than thirty minutes grilling him on the details of his education.

He was having none of that since the bus would be departing soon. But still, talking to his grandma had calmed his mind. He no longer felt jittery and was already in the best state of mind to do his best in the game. He felt even more eager to begin the match.

"Okay, guys, it's time," yelled Trond Henriksen, the Rosenborg assistant head coach. "Let's board the bus right away. We don't want to be late." He added, clapping his hands.

On hearing the coach yelling, all the players, including Zachary, stopped whatever they were doing and made a beeline for the bus. They looked imposing as they moved towards the bus in their well-cut black suits. Most of them were conversing among themselves in small groups. On the other hand, the technical staff, including the coaches and the medics, had donned their jackets over simple Rosenborg tracksuits. They were the last to board the bus after all the eighteen players on the match squad had taken their seats.

A few minutes later, the bus took off and quickly got on the E6 highway, heading towards Østbyen. It was one of the Trondheim neighborhoods located just 4.9 kilometers away from Lerkendal. The region was home to Strindheim Idrettslag—the club Rosenborg would be facing in the second round of the Norwegian Cup at 6:00 PM later that day.

Zachary sat at the back together with Fredrik Midtsj? and Nicki Nielson. But he didn't engage in any conversation with them. Instead, he concentrated on listening to his music while watching the fleeting scenery outside, through the bus window.

He could feel the bus wheels rolling over the road, following the curves and smoothly greeting each slope. Soon, it rounded a corner and entered a neighborhood dominated by a natural green. As Zachary

gazed absentmindedly out of the window, beyond the road—across the horizon, he felt that it was a beautiful day—the best for his debut game on the Rosenborg first team. Although it was still spring, the Trondheim roads shimmered in the glow of the evening sun. The sunlight had conjured the most brilliant mosaics, reflecting from each leaf and wisp of cloud. There was a promise of good weather that evening. Zachary couldn't have wished for better conditions to play his debut game.

Fifteen minutes later, the Rosenborg bus pulled into the parking lot of the Ruta Arena. Zachary followed the rest of his teammates as they alighted from the bus—and a minute later, he stood before the stadium where he would play his debut game. He felt excited as he watched the fans and the few journalists struggling to get close to the bus.

He had finally made it into the squad of a top team in Norway. If he played well, he would also be signing autographs like the rest of his teammates within a month. He couldn't think of a time he had ever been happier. He hadn't even felt such emotion even while lifting the Riga and the Norwegian Youth cups. He smiled softly, letting quiet contentment spread through him.

He started observing his surroundings, his gaze roaming across the stands holding a few early fans that had already taken their seats. The stadium was a small one, probably with a capacity of fewer than 3000 seats, by his estimation. He couldn't help but wonder whether Kasongo and his former teammates had come to watch his debut game. But from where he stood, he couldn't make out the faces of any of the spectators.

Meanwhile, he noticed that the security personnel had started clearing away the fans and journalists crowding around the bus. The fans, in particular, seemed particularly enthusiastic to get close to the players. They disregarded the security personnel and tried their best to get autographs from the star players like Mikael Dorsin and Mix Diskerud.

Zachary could understand why. Rosenborg was a giant in Norwegian football. Everywhere the Rosenborg players went, they received a lot of attention from both the media and fans alike. That was even more so in Trondheim—the home city of the club. They were superstars.

So, despite Ruta Arena being the home ground for Strindheim, there were a lot of Rosenborg fans that had still come to spectate the game. After all, it was only a 10-to-15-minute drive from Lerkendal.

"Guys," Coach Johansen shouted after the security personnel had cleared the way into the stadium. "Let's head to the dressing room and change into our warm-up kits as soon as possible. We only have

slightly over an hour before the game. So, be quick." He added, leading the way. The players followed after him.

Chapter 113 - To The Ruta Arena II

Kristin Stein arrived at the Ruta Arena just as the Rosenberg players were entering the dressing room. "You see, we're late because of your dilly-dallying," she said, using the Norwegian language. "I have even failed to catch a glimpse of the players before they could enter the dressing room."

"Relax," Monica Rønning, a slim dark-haired girl who was her flatmate, said in response. "We still have an hour to the start of the game. What use is there in seeing the players before the start of the match?"

Kristin sighed, shaking her head. "What do you know? I wished to get an autograph from Mike Jensen and Nicki Nielsen before the start of the game. They are the two new stars of our team. But now, I've already missed out."

Monica frowned on hearing that. "You're hopeless," she said. "Can't you ask that neighbor of ours to get you the autograph? I've seen you talking to him on multiple occasions. Why don't you ask him to help?"

"We're not that close enough for me to ask him to grab me autographs from another player," Kristin replied. "Moreover, he has just joined the team. Asking for an autograph on my behalf would make him uncomfortable around his teammates. Imagine walking up to a teammate and asking for a signature. If you were in his place, would you be able to do it?"

"If that won't work, you can try asking your grandpa for help."

"Are you joking?" Kristin smiled wryly.

"Then, you can only wait for another chance," Monica said. "But for now, let's get our tickets first and head to the stands. The stadium is quite small. I'm worried we won't be able to get any seats if we delay."

"Okay, let's buy the tickets," Kristin concurred and led the way to the gate of the Ruta Arena.

Just after Kristin and Monica had entered the stadium, another group of young men and women arrived at the stadium gate. They were Zachary's acquaintances. They had all donned black and white Rosenberg beanies on their heads, Rosenberg scarfs around their necks, plus white Rosenberg jerseys under their jackets. They seemed like the staunchest fans of the Troll Kids. Owing to that simple fact, they attracted a few unfriendly stares from the Strindheim home fans as they made their way to the ticket office.

"This is quite the small place," Kasongo commented right after paying for his ticket. "Are you guys sure we are in the right place? The stadium where Rosenberg will be facing Strindheim Idrettslag in the second round of the Norwegian Cup?"

The four others around him laughed at that.

"Don't take Strindheim Idrettslag lightly," Kendrick Otterson chipped in, shaking his head. "Although their stadium seems below par, the club itself—how should I call it?" He paused, seemingly recalling some information. "They are a very famous and competitive multisport club with sections for athletics, handball, football, speed skating, and cross-country skiing. Their cross-country ski team even has several world cup competitors. Petter Northug Jr, one of the top athletes in Norway, is from around here. So, they aren't just a simple football club. They deserve our respect."

"Then, they should build a stadium befitting their status," Paul Otterson said. He had also just finished paying for his ticket.

"But their men's football team is only in the second division," Kendrick said, shaking his head. "And they don't need a bigger football stadium for skiing or skating."

"Okay, guys," said Melissa Romano, frowning slightly. "Let's enter the stadium. At the rate at which the fans are flooding in, it'll be full in only a few minutes. So, we'd better hurry."

"Agreed," Marta Romano, her twin sister, said, nodding.

"Okay, then," Kendrick said, leading the way further into the stadium. The rest followed after him—and in only a few minutes, they managed to find some seats at the bottom section of the stands.

But just as Kasongo was about to settle in one of the seats, he heard someone calling his name. He turned around and noticed that it was Kristin Stein. "Kasongo," she yelled, trying to make herself heard over the chatter of the surrounding fans. "Why don't you and your friends join us here? We have plenty of space." She pointed at the unoccupied seats beside her.

"You know her," Paul asked, eyeing him with a smile that wasn't a smile.

"Yes," Kasongo replied. "Don't get any wrong ideas. She's the granddaughter of Mr. Martin Stein, the scout who brought us to Trondheim. She's also Zachary's friend." He added, stealing a glance at Marta Romano.

"Did you say, Martin Stein?" Both Paul and Kendrick exclaimed, their eyes widening and mouths agape. They looked comical.

"Yes, Mr. Stein, the scout," Kasongo replied, stealing a few glances at Kristin, who was still awaiting their response. "Anything the matter? Why are you both surprised?"

Both Kendrick and Paul sighed in unison.

"You may not know this since you only arrived at the academy two years ago," Kendrick said. "But Mr. Stein is a legend, famous in most circles of those that have supported Rosenborg for a long time. He was an executive on the club board until three or four years ago. I can't remember the exact time he retired."

"I have heard that he is one of the people that have contributed a lot to the club's success. That's why there's a saying: Coach Eggen in the light, Mr. Stein in the dark. Many have claimed that that has been the key to Rosenborg's success over the past two decades. He may still be on the management, despite not actively participating in club matters over the years."

"Isn't he just a simple scout?" Kasongo looked at Kendrick doubtingly. He still remembered the first time he had seen the scout back in Lubumbashi. Mr. Stein was in simple Khaki shorts, an unironed shirt, and

casual sandals. He had no bearing whatsoever of a person who'd ever been part of a famous Norwegian club's management.

"You're joking, right," Paul replied, frowning at him. "How can you not know this when he's the one who scouted you?"

"Guys," Melissa cut in, interrupting their exchange. "You better decide whether we're going to watch the match over there or stay here. She is waiting, and the players are about to start their warm-up. So, make up your minds."

"Okay, okay," Kasongo said, stealing one more glance at Kristin. He noted that the five seats beside her were still unoccupied. "What do you think, guys? Should we watch the match from over there?" He asked the rest.

"It's fine with me," Kendrick said.

"Me, too..."

"Okay, then." Kasongo nodded after hearing the responses of the rest. "Since you all concur, let's watch the match from over there."

Chapter 114 - The Pre-Match Dynamic Warm-Up

"Okay, guys, let's head out for the pre-match dynamic warm-up," Mr. Rolf Aas, the fitness coach, yelled, walking around the dressing room. "Move it. Hurry up. We only have an hour to kick-off." He added, clapping his hands as he passed by players who were still dressing up.

On hearing the yelling coach approaching, Zachary quickly tightened his shoelaces, pushed his gentle shoes and backpack underneath the bench, and followed the rest of the players out of the visitor's dressing room. He had already donned his black Rosenborg tracksuit and green Nike boots. He was more than ready to begin warming up.

He marched confidently through the corridors, trailing behind a few of his teammates. He wasn't the least bit nervous. Even in his academy days, he had always found it easy to adjust his mental state before matches. While off the pitch, his mind would sometimes get clouded by fleeting thoughts. But

every time he donned his match attire and boots, everything irrelevant would disappear from his mind. He would immediately begin thinking solely of the game at hand. He was glad to see he could achieve a similar state even before his debut as a professional.

"SHALALALALALALA oh Rosenborg, SHALALALALALALA oh Rosenborg, SHALALALALALALA..."

Zachary's ears picked up a loud chant sang in chorus by what must have been thousands of voices as he trekked through the corridors, heading to the pitch. He was surprised by the fact that it was the Rosenborg fans dominating the cheering. Despite being visitors at the Ruta Arena, they seemed to have taken over the whole venue. The chanting grew louder and louder until it reached a crescendo when Zachary and his teammates stepped onto the pitch and started waving to the passionate away fans. At that moment, cheers rose into the air like the greatest of celebratory fireworks displays. The Ruta Arena was already on fire even before the match begun.

Zachary was surprised once more by how quickly the prior relatively empty stands had been saturated with passionate supporters. It had only been fifteen minutes since he'd entered the dressing room, but all he could see around the stadium were countless fans in their team colors. Some had even crowded around the mesh surrounding the pitch since the stands couldn't absorb them all. They were a sea of smiles, a chorus of loud, spirited hearts—eagerly awaiting the beginning of the second-round fixture of the Norwegian Football Cup.

Zachary shifted his attention from the stands and continued walking onto Rosenborg's half of the field. In the meantime, he observed the Strindheim players who had long started their dynamic pre-match warm-up routine. Although they were only a second division team, they looked very imposing in their light blue training attire. They went about their warm-up with undivided attention under the supervision of their coaches. Zachary could tell they were a team intent on emerging victorious despite facing one of the Norwegian football giants.

"Nervous?" A voice sounded from behind Zachary. He turned around and noticed that it was Mikael Dorsin, the veteran defender who'd asked him the question.

"No, at all," Zachary replied honestly and returned to observing the opponents.

"Did you rest well last night?"

"Yes, I slept like a baby for eight or more hours. I'm more than ready for the game."

"That's great then," Mikael said, patting his back slightly. "This is your debut game. Try to link up well with your teammates. Don't act as if you're alone out there. Pass the ball around quickly, and you will be okay."

"Okay," Zachary replied. "I'll do my best to connect with my teammates out there. Don't worry."

"Then, I'm glad." Mikael nodded, smiling. "Come, let's warm-up together. We usually have a few minutes of personal stretching drills before the actual pre-match dynamic warm-up begins. Let's take advantage of these few minutes to sweat a bit. It'll be good for you when the match begins since you're on the starting eleven today."

"That's fine with me," Zachary said. He didn't have any reason to refuse the vice-captain. Mikael Dorsin was one of the other few first-team players, aside from Nicki, who had made an effort to keep interacting with him over the previous two months. The vice-captain seemed not to mind his off-handish behavior.

He always acted like the Rosenborg veteran he was. He was passionate about the team and kept track of all his teammates during every training session. Moreover, he was so experienced that he was like a coach on the field of play. Zachary only saw benefits in warming up with such a player.

So, for the next ten minutes, he accompanied the assistant captain on a simple warm-up routine. They didn't do anything excessive or complicated but only stretched and jogged on Rosenborg's side of the pitch.

Zachary soon became engrossed in the exercise, forgetting everything around him and focusing solely on getting his body ready for the match. Before he knew it, the fitness coach blew a whistle, indicating it was time for the official pre-match dynamic warm-up to begin. That part of the warm-up was led entirely by the fitness coach.

Everyone followed the fitness coach's lead as he guided them on every stretch and every movement in the routine. They started with a light jog and progressed into upper body stretches. They went through the arm circles, alternating them up and down before doing body twists. When they finished with the upper body, they focused on warming up their legs and lower bodies for the next twenty minutes.

Since the session was necessary for preventing injuries in the field players, the fitness coach was extremely strict with the starting eleven. He watched them like a hawk as they went through basic lunges, calf stretches, quad stretches, and other simple light dynamic routines useful for the lower limbs. He didn't allow any starting player for that day to relax or engage in conversation for the entire course of the exercise.

Zachary had gotten used to highly intensive exercises over the previous two months. So, he breezed through the workout without even feeling out of breath.

When the dynamic warm-up session finally ended, he picked up a ball—and then started juggling while moving slowly across the green. He mostly used his legs but sometimes utilized his head and shoulders to keep the ball under control. He was only trying to feel out the ball and prepare himself for the action that was about to commence a few minutes later.

Meanwhile, he could hear the cheers of the fans becoming more animated as the kick-off drew closer. But he ignored them and forced himself to focus solely on his ball work. He wanted to utilize every single minute of the session to ready himself for the match. That way, he could perform at his best when the game started.

"Okay, guys," he heard Trond Henriksen, the head assistant coach, yell after a few more minutes. "Let's head back to the dressing room. We only have about thirty minutes to prepare. So, wind up whatever you're doing." He added, moving around Rosenborg's half of the field.

Zachary immediately stopped his juggling and looked around. He couldn't believe that the 30 minutes of pre-match warm-ups had slipped by so quickly while he was immersed in his ball work. However, he reacted immediately and followed his teammates back to the dressing room. The team only had 30 minutes to prepare. So, he hurried, jogging all the way back, since he was eager to listen to the coach's pre-match address.

Chapter 115 - The Pre-Match Tactical Briefings

On reaching the dressing room, Zachary quickly dried his face with a towel and then changed out of the warm-up gear. He ignored the chatter around him and carefully picked up the hanger with his jersey from a nearby wall hook.

A smile lit up his face, softening his features as he held his black Rosenborg Jersey up in front of him for the first time before a match. He was pleased as a punch at having almost fulfilled his previous life's

dream. In only a few minutes, he would play his debut game as a professional in Europe. It all seemed so surreal.

Only a few months prior, he had had to properly fold his jersey and shove it in his backpack before heading to the venue of a match. But since he was already a professional, on contract with Rosenborg BK, he could finally enjoy the taste of finding his jersey already prepared in the dressing room. Moreover, even if he required new boots for a match, the club would prepare them. Being a pro had its perks.

Without caring about the coaches and fellow teammates in the dressing room, he held the jersey in front of him—and then looked it over for a while. It was the typical black trefoil 3-stripes t-shirt with the words REMA 1000 inscribed on its front.

Zachary decided that it wasn't the best of designs since his name was displayed in smaller letters below the large 33 number on the jersey's backside.

But he had no right to complain about the club's fashion. That was the job of the club's marketing and public relations personnel. So, he quickly slipped on his jersey and nodded to himself after noticing that it was the perfect size for him—not overly large and not tight in any place. It seemed the club's fashion handlers had done their job well. He was content.

"Hurry and finish up," Zachary heard Trond Henriksen, the assistant head coach, yelling after a few more minutes. "The pre-match tactical briefing will start in two. Be ready."

Zachary looked up and noticed that Coach Johansen had already started inscribing the formation on the tactics board at the front of the dressing room. So, without further ado, he quickly tightened his ankle guards and pulled on stockings before slipping into his green boots.

He could finally let go and relax since he was fully prepared to begin the game. He knew he was in good condition. He could feel it right into his bones that he had more than it took to play well in his debut match. So, he leaned back on the bench and started sipping on water while waiting for the coach's pre-match tactical briefing.

After sketching the starting formation on the tactics board, Coach Johansen took a moment to observe his players. Most of them had already finished donning their away-match outfits and were only waiting for his briefing to commence. They all had a confident air about them and seemed quite eager to start the match.

Coach Johansen nodded in approval, a soft smile outlining his face. He was pleased with the high energy levels his players were projecting. For the Norwegian Football Cup second-round game, he had mainly selected the line-up from second-stringers. He intended to rest his starting eleven for the match against Aalesund the following weekend. Aalesund had been performing well since the new Tippeligaen season started. Under their new manager, formerly a Rosenborg coach, they had played good football in the first six matches—and as a result, were even in the top four of the table.

So, Coach Johansen couldn't take the next Tippeligaen fixture lightly. He didn't want to risk losing a third consecutive time in the league. He had readily switched out all his starting midfielders against Strindheim, the second-division team.

But he wasn't worried in the slightest. The young players he had selected were all in top shape and with a high-enough match condition index based on how they'd been performing during training. If they managed to maintain their composure, they would demolish the second division team with little effort.

Coach Johansen looked at his watch and noted there wasn't much time remaining before the kick-off. "Okay, fellas," he shouted, clapping his hands. "Eyes on the board. Let's go over the main points of our game plan once again before we go out into the field."

The players in the dressing room instantly quietened down and focused solely on him. He nodded before saying: "Today, we're playing Strindheim Idrettslag in the second round of the Norwegian Football Cup. We're the stronger team—the team with a rich history in Norwegian Football. We can't be losing to a second division team in the second round of the Cupen. So, my instructions are to play with confidence and to play as a team. As long as we do those two things right, we'll win this game, hands down. Are we clear?"

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

"I already discussed the game plan yesterday night—so I won't delve much into it again," the coach said, caressing his chin.

"But remember: we're playing with a 4-3-3 attacking formation." He pointed at the tactics board. "We need to be highly agile, especially in the midfield."

"Ole, Zach, and Fredrik," he intoned, his gaze resting on the three players. "I expect assertiveness and quick thinking in the middle of the pack. I need swift transitions from defense to attack. You'll need to work together and cover each other to achieve such efficiency. Play smart, release the ball with accuracy, and set up the forwards quickly. That way, we'll tear Strindheim apart easily. Are you with me, Zach, Ole, and Fredrik?"

"Yes, coach," the three players replied spiritedly.

Coach Johansen nodded, half smiling.

"For the forwards," he continued, waving a casual hand across the tactics board. "As I mentioned during yesterday's training, the two on the flanks will have to keep falling back to help the defensive backs. You can't just relax when we don't have the ball. I don't want to see what happened against Sandnes repeating itself in this game. Play like professionals, not like a bunch of kids out for fun."

"Jaime, John, and Nicki," he said, sweeping his gaze over the three Rosenborg forwards for that match. "Are you with me?"

"Yes, coach," the three replied.

"In case the Strindheim players decide to hold possession within their half, you—the three forwards will need to press them as quickly as possible. Pressure their defenders with high pressing zones around here." He paused slightly, tapping rhythmically at the attacking positions of the three strikers on the tactics board. "Force them to lose the ball. That way, we can always win back possession quickly and recommence our attacks."

"For the defenders: keep it cool, play with confidence, and always clear away from goal when you don't have options. I don't want to see any dribbling close to our box. Are we clear?"

"Yes, coach."

"The rest is all up to you as players," he said, half-smiling.

"Are there any questions?" The coach asked, sweeping a glance over the dressing room. "Zachary, Ole, John, any questions?" He singled out a few of his players on seeing the whole squad remain silent.

"No, coach, no, coach..." All three singled-out players replied with negative responses.

"Okay, then," Coach Johansen said, the corners of his mouth morphing into a smile. "Let's go out and win the game. We are aiming to become champions. We'll not be—stopped at this round of the Cupen."

"ROSENBORG, VICTORY, VICTORY, TROLL KIDS VICTORY..."

The players started chanting their routine dressing room victory slogan after Coach Johansen had completed his pre-match briefing. He noted that most of the starting eleven and the substitutes sang with animated voices, clearly excited about the game that was about to commence. He wasn't surprised since that was how Rosenborg players always boosted their morale before every fixture they played.

But what bugged him slightly was that Zachary didn't take part in the victory chanting to boost himself up. Instead, he remained seated on the side with his eyes closed. Coach Johansen couldn't help but wonder whether the boy was praying or if the pressure of his debut match had caught up to him.

He'd observed that the boy had been in a quiet mood—different from his academy self over the previous month. Although he was a workout addict back in the academy, he had still tried to interact with a few of his teammates before each game. He'd even had three close friends on the academy team.

[Is it because he wasn't on the starting line-up for two months?] The coach wondered, still observing Zachary. But he didn't want to mix in different issues when the kick-off was only minutes away. So, he made a mental note to have a small chat with him after the game. He didn't want any unstable factors on the squad.

Concurrently in the dressing room of Strindheim IL—

Finn Morten Moe, the head coach, was giving the concluding remarks of his pre-match briefing. He repeated his tactical analysis of Rosenborg, albeit a summarized version of it, for the umpteenth time that day.

"We have an advantage since they're only fielding their young players in the midfield," the coach said, his tone solemn. "I have even heard that one of their central midfielders is an 18-year-old fresh graduate from the academy. He hasn't even played a single game for Rosenborg. That means they're taking us lightly." He grinned, folding his arms across his chest.

"But we can use that against them," he said after a moment.

"So, Emil, Preben, and Sindre, I want you to give their midfielders hell," he said, casting a glance at the three players. The three were the central midfielders in his 4-3-3 starting line-up. "I want you to run at those young players whenever they have the ball. Give special care to that 18-year old, show him the difference between the academy and the pro stage. If we can do that, we'll surely create several good chances in the first half. Okay?"

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

Finishing his tactical breakdown of the opponent's weaknesses, the coach swept a glance over all his players. He noticed that they were very confident and stable—at least from their body language. The excited looks on their faces were obvious.

The coach nodded in satisfaction before continuing. "I know that Rosenborg is a strong team. They play a steady game and will be the fiercest opponent we have faced so far this season. But believe in your selves. Believe that you can score and win the game."

"But above all, give your best while enjoying your football," he added, smiling softly at some of his players. "Give the best you have. That means putting in one-hundred-and-twenty percent effort. Remember the hard work you have put in during the offseason. Don't leave any regrets on the pitch. That's all I'm asking. Okay?"

"Yes, coach," the players replied in chorus, their voices full of energy.

"Okay then, let's go out and create history," the coach said, pumping his fist into the air. "Strindheim!" He shouted after a few moments.

"STRINDHEIM, STRINDHEIM, VICTORY..." The players roared out loud—together in a huddle and ran out of the dressing room. They were eager to start the game and give the Troll Kids hell.

Chapter 116 - Debut Game I

Kristin glanced at her watch. It was twelve minutes to six—the official kick-off time. "The teams should be coming out right about now," she said excitedly to Monica Rønning—her friend seated on her right.

Before Monica could voice her reply, the stadium's loudspeakers came alive, booming over and dwarfing the chatter around her. And without any delay, the live commentary in Norwegian began.

"Good evening, everyone! Today, we're bringing you the Norwegian Football Cup—the tournament that'll determine the Norwegian Football Champions for this year," the melodic voice of a female commentator sounded from the loudspeakers.

"I'm Anne Rimmen, your lovely commentator, bringing you the live commentary for this Norwegian Cup second-round game alongside our special guest Harald Brattbakk, a former Rosenborg player and legend. He'll be our pundit for today's match. Mr. Brattbakk, can you say hello to our listeners?"

"Good evening, everyone," Kristin heard the booming voice of Harald Brattbakk come to her through the loudspeakers.

"Hehe," Anne Rimmen, the first commentator, chuckled. "We're pleased to have you here, Mr. Brattbakk."

"Thank you, Anne."

"For this second-round match, on one side, we have Strindheim Toppfotball, a club doing quite well in the second division. On the other, we have Rosenborg Ballklub, Norway's most successful club. They

have won the Cupen eleven times as I speak now. So, what's your take on these two teams, Mr. Brattbakk?"

"Well, I think I don't need to give an in-depth analysis of Rosenborg," Mr. Harald Brattbakk replied.

"They're a team that has been performing well in the top league for the past two decades. There's no doubt that they're the favorites to win this second-round fixture of the Norwegian Cup. With the form Nicki Nielson, their center forward, is on, they can score goals at any time. We only have to hope that Mr. Boyd Johansen, the new head coach, does his job well. Rosenborg shouldn't have any trouble winning the game."

"Then, Strindheim..." Anne Rimmen probed.

"Oh," Mr. Harald Brattbakk said. "Strindheim is a good team. They really are and have been doing well in the second division. They won against Steinkjer FK in the first round of the Cupen with a score of 7:0. That should say something about the talent of the players compared to others in the lower divisions. But come on. They are facing Rosenborg here. To win, they would need a great deal of luck on their side."

"Does this mean that you believe that Rosenborg will win this game?"

"You can't be one hundred percent sure in football," Mr. Harald Brattbakk replied. "All I'm saying is that Rosenborg has a very high chance of winning the game. It all depends on how the new coach handles the game."

"Okay, thank you, Harald," Anne Rimmen said. "Let's now focus on the game at hand and..." She stopped mid-sentence as the lilting cheers rose to a brief crescendo, jamming out every other sound in the stadium.

The crowds came alive suddenly, releasing pent-up energy at the long-awaited kick-off. For the next minute, the chanting of the fans was deafening.

However, Kristin wasn't in any way disturbed by the noise.

She had been a Rosenborg fan for as long as she could remember and had attended countless matches ever since she was young. She always felt at home in the stadium crowd and could sing and celebrate freely with the rest of the Rosenborg supporters.

So, she clapped her hands, following the rhythm of the crowd. But she didn't forget to keep her eyes fixed on the exit of the dressing room. She was eager for the match to begin.

"Led by the three-match officials, the two teams are entering the field of play," Anne Rimmen, the commentator, announced after a few moments amidst majestic music.

Kristin immediately noticed that the players of both teams had finally appeared. They marched onto the pitch in two lines, holding hands with adorable young kids clad in the two teams' match jerseys. Among the Rosenborg players, she could pick out the very tall Zachary in his black Rosenborg away jersey. He walked at the back of the rest of the players—his head held high with a somber expression on his face.

"In yellow jerseys, blue shorts, and yellow stockings, is Strindheim Toppfotball, the home team." Kristin heard Anne Rimmen, the commentator, begin the introductions as the players lined up to shake hands on the field.

"In Strindheim's goal, there's Ole Naess, the number-1 and captain."

"In the defense, there are four players. The center backs are No.14 Mats Ingebrigtsen and No.15 Vidar Giske Henriksen. The left-back is No.24, Mathias Hegna, while the right-back is No.4, Kristian Sørli."

"Coach Finn Morten Moe seems to have also gone for a 4-3-3 formation this time around. In the midfield, there are three players—namely: No.3, Emil Røkke, No.26, Sindre Kjos-Wenjum, and No.8, Preben Hammersland."

"And finally, the Strindheim forwards are No.22, Christopher Moen, No.16, Eirik Nerland, and No.22, Sondre Stokke. In black jerseys, we have the team everyone is familiar with; Rosenborg..."

Kristin listened intently as the commentator announced all the players. She nodded in approval on hearing the names—Tore Reginiussen, the new captain, and Nicki Nielsen, the center forward. The two

had been playing well since the beginning of the new season. But what worried her was that most of the other usual Rosenborg first-team members were missing from the line-up.

Benching one or two midfielders would have been okay. However, the coach had risked using only the younger players without much experience in the midfield. He seemed to be taking the game lightly, and that was anything but assuring as far as she was concerned.

"Zachary seems like he's going to war," she heard Kasongo say jokingly after the commentators announced Zachary's name. "Look at that expression of his; it's like he wants to kill all the Strindheim players. His opponents won't stand a chance as far as I can tell."

The four friends seated on his left laughed at that.

"I feel sorry for Strindheim," Kendrick Otterson, a former teammate of Zachary, said, shaking his head. "Playing against Zachary when you have never seen him working with the ball is the worst mistake any club can make."

"True," Melissa Romano concurred. "I've just recalled the goals he scored against Valencia in the SIA Cup. If he can net one like that, he'll become a Rosenborg superstar right away. I wonder if he'll still remember us after that."

"Do you guys really think Zachary will be able to hold his own in this match?" Kristin couldn't help but ask after seeing the relaxed atmosphere Kasongo and his friends were projecting. They seemed not the least bit worried about Zachary, who was playing his debut match and supposedly their friend.

Kasongo smiled, casting a fleeting glance at her. "When did you last see Zachary playing?" He asked.

"About two years ago, I guess," Kristin replied honestly. "Why do you ask?" She had been traveling a lot and studying over the past two years. So, she hadn't been able to make time to watch academy matches.

"Then, get this from us who have been playing with Zachary for the past two years," Kasongo said. "He's not a perfect person off the pitch. But when the ball is at his feet, he turns into something else. You only have to wait and see. He should give us plenty of surprises in this game."

At exactly 6:00 PM, the referee blew his whistle.

On hearing the whistle, something seemed to click in Zachary's mind. All the background hubbub vanished instantly from his mind, leaving him in a tranquil state. The loud cheering of the fans seemed like a faraway din to him at that moment. His focus was entirely on the match, without any random thoughts running through his mind. In that state, he watched Sondre Stokke, the Strindheim center forward, raise his leg high and kick the ball back to his own half.

The Norwegian Cup second-round game had finally started with Strindheim's kick-off.

Preben Hammersland, the Strindheim attacking midfielder, received the ball in midfield with a simple touch. He then pulled it back with his right foot and passed it across the field to Mathias Hegna, the left-back.

The latter immediately controlled the ball close to the touchline on Strindheim's left flank. With very swift motions, he kicked it towards Christopher Moen—the left-forward. In the first minute of the game, Strindheim was already on the attack. It seemed the Strindheim players were intent on scoring an early goal by attacking through the flanks.

Zachary adjusted his position in the midfield, moving towards the right when he saw Christopher Moen skip past John Chibuike, Rosenborg's right-forward. With his high game intelligence, he'd smelt some 'danger' as soon as the forward had touched the ball. Christopher was one of those fast wingers that could beat any defender for pace.

Zachary's soccer intuition was already warning him that if the skipper wasn't stopped in the wing, he would become a problem for the Rosenborg center backs.

So, with a one-track mind, he went into action right away. He decided to stop the winger before he moved any further towards Rosenborg's goal. As a midfielder in a 4-3-3 formation, he couldn't simply think of attacking. He also had to help the team defend against possible threats to the goal. Otherwise, Ole Selnes, Rosenborg's central defensive midfielder, would have problems with the unmarked opposing forwards.

So, he started tracking Christopher's run from the touchline—his mind quickly processing all the possible routes the forward might take towards the goal. In the meantime, his A-graded spatial awareness and risk analysis enabled him to make a mental map of the other Strindheim players around him.

When he established that there wasn't any unmarked Strindheim player in his vicinity, he raced across the pitch towards the sprinting Christopher Moen like the wind. He accelerated to his top speed in an instant, his legs pumping like the pistons of a race car. In no time, he cut off the left-forward as he skipped past Brede Moe, Rosenborg's right-back.

Zachary maintained his composure, slid in, and tackled the ball without making any physical contact with Christopher's legs. He'd made sure to hook the ball when the skipper had just made a turn, cutting back into the pitch—towards goal.

The challenge was successful.

Zachary stopped the ball with an outstretched left foot and sent the skipper tumbling to the ground.

Zachary was sure he'd gotten the challenge right.

He didn't even cast a second glance at Christopher, who was in the middle of faking an injury on the grass.

He quickly picked himself from the ground and passed the ball to Ole Selnes in defensive midfield right away.

He didn't want to make any complicated plays while the game had just started. He would follow Coach Johansen's advice and grow into the game slowly. He wanted to play it simple until he'd established the skill level of the opponents. That way, he would avoid repeating his previous life's mistakes.

Chapter 117 - Debut Game II

It was the eighth minute of the second round of the Norwegian Football Cup. Strindheim regained possession once again after Nicki Nielsen failed to connect with Ole's long-range pass. The Strindheim players, in yellow and blue, were on fire in the first few minutes of the game.

Mats Ingebrigtsen, one of Strindheim's center backs, had outjumped the Rosenborg forward and cleared the ball away from the box.

Without any delay, the Strindheim players resumed their attack. Sindre Kjos-Wenjum, the left-midfielder, picked up the ball from the Ingebrigtsen's clearance. He chested it down to the grass and made a through pass to Christopher Moen, the left-forward.

With skillful footwork, Christopher Moen skipped past Brede Moe, Rosenborg's right-back, once again. He dashed across the touchline, penetrating deep into Rosenborg's half in only an instant.

Zachary had been on the alert and had carefully tracked the forward's movement since he'd gotten ahold of the ball. He had already noted that the Strindheim players seemed to favor the left-forward since they kept feeding him passes. So, Zachary had long prepared himself to get into action and stop the striker once more.

The coach had repeatedly emphasized the midfielders' responsibility to help the defense in thwarting threats to goal throughout the match. For the first eight minutes, Zachary had observed those simple instructions to the letter. Whenever the opponents got on the attack, he would fall back into his half and adjust his position accordingly. That way, he had managed to stop three Strindheim attacks in the first few minutes of the game.

As a midfielder, he had to play smart, using his brain to wear down opponents rather than relying solely on tight-marking and tackling. So, at all times, he always made a mental map of all the players around the field in order to position himself perfectly.

Moreover, he had realized that it was easier to keep track of both opponents and teammates ever since he'd learned the Zinedine-Pirlo Mental Juju. He could analyze the risk on the pitch quickly and react accordingly. Thanks to that, he had slowly grown more confident in his defensive capabilities as the game progressed.

So, he wasn't afraid of meeting Christopher Moen in a one-on-one encounter. He had stopped him in his tracks before—he could stop him again.

However, Zachary changed his decision only after a few seconds. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Tore Reginiussen, the Rosenborg captain and center back, racing from his position and darting towards Christopher like a bullet.

The center back ran so fast that he caught up to the left-forward in only a few seconds. He didn't reduce his speed even when he reached the sprinting Christopher. He instead slid in and tackled the ball, shoving it out of the field of play.

In the meantime, Christopher was—sent tumbling to the ground by yet another Rosenborg player. He was having a nightmare of a game. It was the third time he'd been sent to the ground as he raced across the touchline.

"Ref," he shouted, waving his arms in the air as he picked himself from the ground. "High boot, high boot..." He added, running towards the referee. However, the referee just ignored him and indicated for Strindheim to take their throw-in.

Zachary smiled at seeing Christopher's reaction. He could tell that the skipper was too used to dribbling past defenders using his pace and footwork. But it seemed he'd forgotten that he wasn't playing a second division game but facing Rosenborg. His dribbling attempts were like child's play in front of the Tippeligaen's top defenders like Tore Reginiussen.

Zachary shook his head and jogged towards the right touchline to defend against the throw-in.

He made a mental note to prevent himself from falling into a situation like Christopher's. He would only try out the dribbling when he was sure his pace and skills—could best any defender in the Tippeligaen. Otherwise, he would be looking to embarrass himself.

"Brede!" Zachary heard Tore Reginiussen yell out loud as he settled into position close to the touchline. "That was the third time you failed to stop that kid. What are you doing on the pitch? Are you sleeping? Get your head into the game. Stop creating a mess for us." The captain seemed angry at the right-back and didn't mince words with him.

Brede Moe just smiled ruefully, shaking his head before concentrating on marking his man once again. He didn't seem the least bit disturbed by the captain's yelling at him.

FWEEEEEEE

The referee blew his whistle after giving a verbal warning to Christopher Moen for his arguing.

Mathias Hegna, the Strindheim left-back, took the throw-in. After a short dash, he planted his feet on the touchline and threw the ball across the line—towards Christopher Moen.

However, that time around, Brede Moe was alert and managed to stop the left-forward. He jumped high and headed the ball, directing it towards the midfield—in Zachary's direction.

Zachary sprang into action right away. He raced towards the ball like the wind and brought it under control with a simple deft touch, skipping past a Strindheim player in the process. His actions were seamless—like those of a veteran midfielder, not a fresh graduate from the academy.

He didn't feel any pressure despite that being his debut match. Instead, he felt his heart throbbing with excitement as he turned with the ball hooked to his left foot. He intended to release the strikers as quickly as possible since he had noticed that most of the Strindheim players had been on the attack in Rosenborg's half.

It was a perfect chance for a counterattack. He couldn't understand why, but he could feel it in his bones. He was sure of it. However, two of Strindheim's central midfielders closed him down quickly, even before he could release the ball.

[What the hell?] Zachary couldn't help but curse inwardly.

He wondered why the Strindheim midfielders had been closing him down quickly ever since the game started. Whenever he was on the ball, they would be upon him in just a matter of seconds.

At the beginning of the game, he'd thought nothing of it since he believed that that—was the tempo and intensity befitting the professional football stage in Europe. However, as the match progressed, he had come to notice that the opponents were targeting him specifically. It seemed like they had taken him as the weak link in Rosenborg's midfield and were intent on forcing him to commit blunders so they could reap profits. In other words, they were giving him special treatment as a newbie fresh from the academy. That time around was no different.

Although Zachary didn't like the feeling of being identified as a weak link, he forced himself to focus on the task at hand. He had a choice to make. He couldn't let the slight bit of displeasure disturb his state of mind.

At that moment, he decided that he could play it safe and pass the ball back to the keeper—the safest option. Or he could take a risk and try to pass the ball beyond the zone of intense rival pressure. That way, he could release the strikers quickly and initiate a counterattack.

Zachary was a gambler by nature. So, he took the riskier but most rewarding action. He raised his leg high and faked a pass towards Lund Hansen, the Rosenborg goalkeeper.

But instead of passing the ball back, he pulled it towards himself with his left boot—thereby initiating one of his Cruyff-turn variations. He'd trained the skill to a high level of mastery and could use it in any situation, even under pressure.

Zachary spun around with the ball, skipping past one of the Strindheim midfielders. With that simple Cruyff-turn, he'd created a yard of space for himself. But he needed to act within seconds, or else the opponents would be upon him once again.

Zachary didn't wish for that to happen. So, he didn't dawdle and looked up across the field. His eyes quickly darted across the two Rosenborg forwards—positioned beyond the zone of intense rival pressure. In his mind, a mental map with the open linear routes for passing the ball appeared instantly. All the while, his A-graded game intelligence coupled with the Zinedine-Pirlo Mental Juju helped him deduce the best place to distribute the ball in nothing more than a flash.

Zachary's mind had worked so fast, probably in overdrive, that he managed to find the best passing route in only a span of a second. Thanks to that, he managed to notice that Nicki Nielsen had just stepped away from his marker in Strindheim's half.

Zachary didn't dilly-dally any longer. He raised his right foot and unleashed a raking pass with the outside of his boot just before the Strindheim midfielders could close him down. He didn't relax, though, but followed after the ball.

The ball flew mid-air through the gaps in-between both opponents and teammates on the pitch, heading towards Nicki Nielsen. Emil Røkke, the Strindheim defensive midfielder, tried to intercept it close to the center circle. He even dived, trying his level best to stop it from reaching Nicki Nielsen with his head. However, all was in vain. The ball seemed to be controlled by a high-tech missile guidance system. It flashed by him at a distance of mere centimeters, continuing onwards to Nicki—who had long started sprinting towards Strindheim's goal.

The cheers in the stadium died down momentarily as Nicki Nielsen, Rosenborg's center forward and number-9, controlled the ball just in front of Strindheim's box. The fans in the stands waited with nervous anticipation—their eyes fixed on the number-9 as he stepped into Strindheim box uncontested.

Zachary's defense splitting pass had helped him gain an advantage over the opposing center backs. So, he had long left them in the dust even without being offside.

Zachary, too, watched with nervous anticipation as the Strindheim goalkeeper came out of the goal to greet Nicki Nielsen. Although he knew the number-9 was a talented striker who had been on form since the beginning of the new season, he couldn't rule out the possibility that he could still miss the opportunity. If that happened, Zachary would lose his chance of making his first assist on the professional stage. So, he was on tenterhooks.

Fortunately, the goddess of luck seemed to be with Nicki Nielsen, Zachary, and the whole of Rosenborg. The number-9 maintained his composure like the talented striker he was. He chipped the ball over the helpless goalkeeper and managed to put Rosenborg ahead in the 13th minute.

1:0

The cheers of the Rosenborg fans exploded like a thunderstorm in the Røya Arena.

Chapter 118 - Debut Game III

The cheers around the stadium were deafening.

Rosenborg had managed to score its opening goal in the 13th minute of the second round of the Norwegian Football Cup.

Kristin celebrated the goal with the rest of the Rosenborg fans in the stands. She could sense that all the supporters around her seemed to be venting their pent-up frustration since their club had lost its previous two fixtures.

"Okay, there we have it, the first goal of Rosenborg Ballklub," Kristin heard Anne Rimmen, the commentator, say, the voice coming to her through the stadium's loudspeakers.

"That was some incredible finishing from Nicki Nielsen, as usual." The commentator chuckled softly.

"The Troll Kids are ahead by one goal. Nicki was as composed as ever in front of the goal. But the assist was even more spectacular. It was the hallmark of quality from Rosenborg's young midfielder—Zachary Bemba." She drawled, trying to pronounce the last name correctly.

"But what we would like to know: was that pass a fluke, or did he intend it? Harald, what do you think?"

"Well, all that matters is that he made the assist that resulted in a goal," Mr. Harald Brattbakk replied. "Moreover, we can't know for sure whether that was luck or pure skill since it is our first time seeing this young midfielder in the Rosenborg colors. We don't have any basis for any inferences."

"Oh," Anne Rimmen said, seeming slightly disappointed. "But if you're to analyze that fifty-yard pass that was the assist, do you think he can replicate that again?"

Harald laughed. "You're a persistent one," he said.

"Yes, I'm."

"Well, from the moment Zachary Bemba touched the ball in his half, you could tell that he intended to release the forwards as quickly as possible for a counterattack. You can see that from the way he made that incredible Cruyff turn to lose the two midfielders that were closing him down."

"He is a very talented midfielder. That I can tell. Just look at the way he made that yard of space for himself in that crowded defensive midfield. That shows us that he has good game reading and can spot opportunities quickly."

"However, that raking pass was something else," Mr. Harald Brattbakk continued. "You have to see how it flowed through the defenders and dropped right into a great position behind Strindheim's defensive line. There might have been some luck involved. But who knows? Maybe we shall get to see some more of the same from Zachary in the future."

"Luck," Kristin heard Kasongo scoff from beside her. "Those people haven't seen anything yet."

The friends around him laughed at that.

"For a moment there, I thought he would go ahead and run through the opponents with the ball," Melissa Romano said, her words colored by her Italian accent.

"This is the professional league, not the academy," Kendrick said, shaking his head. "Dribbling would be quite hard for him at this stage."

"Well, you never know," Kasongo said. "If anyone can do it, it's Zachary. He's phenomenal."

Kristin was getting more and more curious about Zachary's current level of skill. From the way his former teammates talked about him, it seemed they believed he could establish himself on the Rosenborg starting roster in no time. They made it seem like making crazy assists was merely a walk in the park for him.

Kristin was surprised. Although she believed in her grandpa's vision, she had thought that Zachary needed time to mature before he could be of any help to Rosenborg.

She'd only been teasing him when she previously requested him to help Rosenborg reach the Europa League quarter-finals. The Troll Kids couldn't even defeat Molde the previous season in the Norway Cup's fourth round. So, it wouldn't be easy for them to go past the group stage of the Europa League.

But if Zachary did have the skills to unleash passes like the one he'd just made, Rosenborg would soar in the following seasons. They already had Mike Jensen, who'd arrived at the club from Brøndby IF the previous February. If they could add on another good midfielder, then they had a chance to go beyond the group stages of the Europa League. She could feel her heart beating much faster than usual as she thought through the possibilities.

"The players have taken their starting positions once again," she heard Anne Rimmen's melodic voice from the loudspeaker. "The celebrations have ended, and the game will be restarting in a few seconds. Harald, do you think since Rosenborg has already scored in the 13th minute, they'll surely win this game?"

"As I already said, you can never be one hundred percent sure in football. Anything can happen."

"Strindheim has had its bouts of attacking spells in the opening minutes. They must be dominating possession by at least 52% if my estimation is right. However, they lack one key factor. They haven't been able to penetrate the final third and score. Their forwards can't seem to connect with their midfielders. If they could correct that simple flaw, they could give Rosenborg a run for their money."

"On the other hand, Rosenborg is now quite comfortable after securing that goal," Mr. Harald Brattbakk continued. "They could sit back and relax—and weather Strindheim's attacks. And when there's an opportunity, they could hit Strindheim on a counterattack. They're the stronger team. So, they can achieve this easily. However, it will all depend on whether the young midfielders can continue holding their own in the middle of the field of play."

"Okay, thank you, Harald," Anne Rimmen said. "For now, let's take you back to the live-action. The game has just restarted, and it's Strindheim with possession."

Kristin smiled, returning her entire focus to the goings-on on the pitch. A Strindheim center back had just received the ball close to his box. However, before he could release it, Nicki Nielsen, the Rosenborg number-9, was upon him.

Nicki closed down the defender and angled his body to block all the possible passing routes forward. The Strindheim center-back could only distribute the ball back to the goalkeeper due to the pressure.

However, Nicki Nielsen didn't let up the heat on the Strindheim defense. He seemed to have gotten more energy after scoring the goal. He continued chasing after the ball until he pressurized the keeper to release the ball wide towards the left-back.

The Strindheim left-back received the ball but was also instantly closed down by John Chibuike, the left-forward. The left-back looked around to find a safe place to release the ball before the Rosenborg number-10 could dispossess him. But he was unsuccessful. All his nearby teammates had already been tight-marked by the highly agile Rosenborg forwards and midfielders. So, he could only kick the ball high towards the Rosenborg half, trying to pick out the Strindheim forwards with a long-range pass.

But, all was still in vain. Tore Reginiussen, the Rosenborg captain, was in top shape in the defense. He out-paced the Strindheim forward and headed the long ball safely back to the keeper. Rosenborg regained possession in that way.

For the next ten minutes, Kristin watched intently as the Rosenborg players dictated the game's tempo. Whenever they didn't have possession, they would use high-pressing tactics to force the Strindheim players to play the ball high. The highly tactical Rosenborg defenders and midfielders would then out-muscle the opponents and easily regain the ball that had been—released. Rosenborg completely overwhelmed Strindheim in the few minutes after the goal.

The young midfielders performed very well in the middle of the field. Their passing was pinpoint-accurate and reminded Kristin of the Tiki-Taka playing style of Barcelona. They'd completely dominated the midfield with that style of play.

Zachary especially stood out. He could tackle and defend. He was also good at running into free spaces, placing himself between opponents, and opening up to receive passes. His sense of positioning on the field and his vision were incredible.

He didn't look in any way like someone playing his debut match. He looked confident and connected with his teammates—to play splendid flowing football. All the midfielders and forwards around him came alive whenever he was on the ball.

By the 25th minute, Rosenborg had managed to push back all the Strindheim players into their own half because of their dominant midfielders. It had been a long time since Kristin had last seen Rosenborg bullying another team, whether strong or weak, in such a manner.

In the 28th minute, Zachary intercepted a Strindheim long-range pass once again. He chested it down close to the center circle and let loose a grounded through-pass towards the wing where Jaime Alás was lurking. And as he'd done throughout the entire game, he dashed forward towards Strindheim's box after releasing the ball.

Jaime Alás, the Rosenborg left-forward, got to the end of Zachary's through-pass close to the touchline. He didn't pause to control the ball since it had landed directly onto his sprinting path. Instead, he fed it past Kristian Sørli, the Strindheim right-back, with a deft first touch—before beating him for pace.

Jaime Alás shrugged off the left-back—who was desperately trying to pull his shirt and chased after the ball like the wind. He got to it close to the goal line on the left flank and sent a teasing grounded pass into the box.

The cross came in so fast that it left the Strindheim center backs without much time to prepare for it. Even the Strindheim goalkeeper didn't come out from between the posts to intercept the ball. The defense of the men in yellow and blue was in shambles.

Nicki Nielsen took advantage of the lapse in defense and sprang into action like a hungry predator that had spotted prey. He skipped past Mats Ingebrigtsen, the Strindheim center back, and slid towards the goal to tap the ball into the back of the net.

It was the best chance Rosenborg had created in minutes. All the fans, including Kristin, stood up from their seats, anticipating another goal from the forward.

However, the number-9 was a second too late. The ball skimmed across the goal's mouth, between the keeper's outstretched hand and Nicki Nielsen's foot by mere inches. It then continued onwards past the legs of a few other players and towards the right flank.

"Oh, my goodness me," Anne Rimmen, the commentator, yelled out—her voice dwarfing the sighs of the Rosenborg fans in the stadium. "What a missed opportunity. That should have been 2:0. Wait..." She paused for a second. "Rosenborg's chance is not over yet. Brede Moe, the Rosenborg right-back, has picked up the ball close to the touchline. He is going to feed it back into the area..."

Kristin's whole attention was on the field of play. She saw Brede Moe skip past Christopher Moen and then unleash a lovely lofted cross into the box.

The second time around, all the players in the box, including Rosenborg's Nicki Nielsen and John Chibuike, jumped high to connect with the incoming cross. All the while, the two tried their best to out-muscle the Strindheim defenders.

However, the Strindheim Keeper, who had just recovered, jumped high and beat them to the ball. He showed great determination and out-muscled all the other players mid-air—before punching the ball away from the box with a strong arm.

Kristin's eyes followed the ball as it flew in an arc—over the players in both black and yellow jerseys—before bouncing a few yards away from the box.

"There it's, it's coming," Kristin heard Kasongo shout excitedly from beside her. She wondered what the African was talking about, but she didn't have time to probe the issue. Instead, her eyes remained trailing the loose ball that was still bouncing away from Strindheim's box.

She was almost letting loose a sigh about the missed opportunity. But then, she saw a tall figure meet the ball that was mid bounce with a left boot, sending it back from whence it'd come. The figure was Zachary, and he'd just unleashed a missile of a shot towards goal on a half volley from twenty-eight yards away.

Kristin was surprised. [How had he gotten there so fast?] She wondered, blinking by reflex. The ball was traveling like a bullet bound for the goal. By the time she reopened her eyes to follow its trail once more, it was just smashing off the crossbar and bouncing on the green—into the back of the net.

2:0. Kristin fell in a trance, mouth agape as she couldn't believe what she'd just witnessed. She could sense that even Zachary's friends, who knew him best, were surprised by the goal.

"Oh my goodness me," the commentator shouted, waking her from the trance. "What a touch of brilliance? What a shocker? Glorious, glorious, magnificent goal! What about that? Zachary Bemba has braced us with an absolute beauty in his debut game. Oh, my! I can't believe it." Anne Rimmen's intoned words in Norwegian at the pace of a machine gun.

The stadium burst into loud cheers once again.

Chapter 119 - Debut Game IV

Intense waves of delight flowed through Zachary after he scored the goal. When he saw the ball nestled in the back of the net, joy overcame him. A wide grin softened his often-intense facial features.

Before unleashing that shot, he had thought he'd been the most content after making it into the starting eleven of Rosenberg and stepping onto the pitch to play his debut game. But he'd been mistaken as nothing beat what he felt after netting the goal. So, he ran towards the corner flag and pumped his fists repeatedly—to let loose and not go mad with pure bliss.

He finally understood why players always celebrated like they'd gone mad after scoring. Over the past two months, he had built up some pent-up frustration because he couldn't make the squad. Moreover, he always felt like an invisible line was separating him from his Rosenberg teammates since he hadn't participated in any matches yet. However, after having played and scored, he felt the frustration dissipate. He could finally relax and let the deep sense of contentment from scoring swell within him.

"Way to go, man. That goal was out of this world." Nicki Nielsen was the first to run up to him and slap (not pat) his back to congratulate him. "Whatever you took before the match, just give me some," he added jokingly, throwing an arm around his shoulder. The other players also came and patted his back slightly to celebrate the goal.

Zachary felt the sense of alienation he'd previously felt among his teammates start to vanish. He was surprised by their team spirit. He hadn't interacted much with them over the past two months, but they'd still regarded him as a teammate during the match. They hadn't isolated him and had even celebrated the goal with him. He finally felt like he'd fully integrated into the team.

FWEEEEEEEE

The referee blew the whistle, signaling the players to retake their starting positions. The match restarted soon after with Strindheim's kick-off.

Zachary didn't let the feeling of brief success cloud his head. He understood he would have to put up a better than a perfect display to make it into the Rosenberg starting eleven. Providing an assist and scoring a single goal against a second division team was probably not sufficient for that. He needed to

show his coaches and teammates that he was reliable and had a surefire ability to win matches. Only then would they stop taking him for granted.

So, he got rid of any redundant thoughts and forced himself to focus solely on the game. He continued playing simple football, passing, running into spaces, and receiving passes in the midfield. He didn't do anything complicated like trying to dribble past more than two opponents, as he'd always done in the academy. When a Strindheim player attempted to close him down, he would release the ball immediately. He felt like he was becoming more in control of the midfield as the game progressed.

As the match proceeded towards the later stages of the first half, Zachary noticed that the Strindheim players had arrayed themselves in a 4-5-1 formation instead of the 4-3-3 they'd played in at the start of the game. Both their right and left forwards had moved a bit backward into their half in order to better deal with Rosenborg's nonstop attacking spells. It also seemed they wanted to limit the impact of the Rosenborg midfield on the game. So they'd narrowed their formation by pinching into the spaces and crowding the midfield.

However, their strategy couldn't stop Rosenborg's dominance. The Rosenborg midfielders no longer tried to play the Tiki-Taka style in the middle of the field—but instead started playing the ball wide as quickly as possible. Whenever Zachary or any other Rosenborg midfielder was on the ball, they would always pass towards the wings—thereby releasing the left and right forwards. That way, Rosenborg was able to continue dominating the game through wing play.

Another goal-scoring chance soon arrived for Rosenborg in the 33rd minute. Tore Reginiussen, Rosenborg's center back, intercepted another long-range pass that had failed to connect with the Strindheim forwards deep in Rosenborg's half. He headed the ball back towards the middle of the crowded midfield.

Zachary went after the ball right away. He jumped high and out-muscled Preben Hammersland, the Strindheim attacking midfielder, before heading the ball towards Ole Selnø, Rosenborg defensive midfielder.

Ole controlled the ball beautifully before passing it towards the flanks where Brede Moe, the right-back, was lurking. Brede ran with it along the touchline and dashed past Christopher Moen, the Strindheim left-forward, before unleashing a cut-back pass into the middle of the pitch where Fredrik Midtsjø was waiting.

Fredrik Midtsj?, Rosenborg's left-midfielder, controlled the ball well, skipping past Emil R?kke, one of Strindheim's defensive midfielders, in the process. Without any pause, he then relinquished it to Zachary, who had just positioned himself behind him.

Zachary received the pass and played a couple of one-twos with both Ole Seln?s and Fredrik Midtsj?—as the three of them continued to spear deep into Strindheim's half.

The Rosenborg midfielders were on fire. They were not just passing the ball quickly among themselves—but intelligently and quickly interchanging positions—so that they could create space and passing lanes for others to exploit. They were merely using their superiority and fluidity of positioning to overcome their opponents. They managed to generate overloads in one section of the field, forcing the defense to tilt unevenly to the right side. Thanks to that, Jaime Alás, Rosenborg's left-forward was left unmarked.

Zachary, of course, spotted him as he received a return pass from Ole while stepping into the final third towards Strindheim's box. So, without any delay, he chipped the ball over the zone of intense rival pressure. Since he'd used the tip of the boot, the ball flew in an impossible arc—over many of the Strindheim defensive players—before landing in the left flank, where Jaime Alás was lurking.

Jaime Alás controlled the ball without any hardship and without facing any immediate pressure. He then fed it forward and raced towards Strindheim's box like a bullet train. He was so fast that he managed to reach the edge of Strindheim's box in mere seconds.

He raised his leg like he was about to unleash a shot, causing all the Strindheim defenders to jump up or slide towards him to block the ball. But instead, the left-forward kicked the ball backward, letting lose a cut-back pass into the middle of the box.

Nicki Nielsen was there in the box as always. However, he didn't react to the ball since it had been—played behind him. Instead, it came straight to Zachary, who had just stepped into the box. He'd started sprinting from the midfield as soon as Jaime Alás had controlled the ball on the left flank. That way, he had created for himself another perfect scoring opportunity.

However, the Strindheim defenders reacted instantly and blocked all his shooting angles. Zachary still raised his foot to shoot but slowed down slightly a moment later. Out of the corner of his eye, he'd noticed John Chibuike also arriving into the box.

So, he made a snap decision right away. He continued swinging his leg downwards as if he was about to unleash another missile of a shot. All the defenders before the Rosenberg goal jumped or slid in to defend the ball once again. However, they were soon disappointed.

Zachary missed the ball intentionally, letting it continue onwards towards John Chibuike, the Rosenberg right forward—who was completely unmarked.

John Chibuike didn't hesitate to lash home from inside the box. He hit the ball precisely into the bottom right corner, and it nestled in the net. The Strindheim defense couldn't even react. They had been owned and bullied by Rosenberg's fluid passing and positioning.

3:0.

Rosenborg had managed to score the third goal in the 36th minute. The stadium exploded into cheers once again.

Coach Johansen watched the game from the technical area. He was satisfied with the performance of his players since they had dominated Strindheim in all areas of the field.

But he was also pretty surprised by how Zachary had dominated in the midfield. It had only been a few months since he graduated from the academy. However, the boy had already evolved his game to fit the professional stage in such a short period. He no longer ran and dribbled the ball for long distances like he'd done back in the academy. Instead, he'd developed his passing and game vision to another level. His new playing style was the best fit for a professional team since football wasn't a one-man's game.

Coach Johansen had been worried that Zachary would try to show off and blunder during the game. He'd feared that the boy would make one of those signature runs of his and maybe attract an injury. But it seems he'd been worried for nothing. The boy was simply a genius and had already evolved his game to another level.

Coach Johansen was quite pleased and shocked by Zachary's performance. A soft smile outlined his face as he continued watching the game until the referee blew the whistle for half-time. By then, the score was still 3:0 in favor of Rosenborg.

Chapter 120 - Debut Game V

Zachary followed the rest of his teammates to the dressing room when the referee blew the whistle for half-time. He could still feel the excitement of competing with pro players in a match even after leaving the field.

"Well done, Zachary," Coach Johansen said, patting his back as they walked through the corridor back to the visitor's dressing room. "Keep doing what you've been doing through the second half, and you'll be fine." He smiled, matching his step.

"Thank you, coach," Zachary replied, smiling lightly. He continued to trail after his teammates while chugging down some water. He intended to use every minute of half time to regain his stamina.

When he entered the dressing room, some of his teammates, like Mikael Dorsin, stood up and said a few words of congratulations on his remarkable performance. Others gave him light pats on the back as he made his way to a seat.

They looked very sincere and made him feel more at home. The mood in the dressing room was a lighthearted one. The players chatted like they were taking a break from a daily training session rather than the second round of the Norwegian Football Cup. They joked amongst themselves and laughed about some of the awkward moments of the first half.

Zachary's 'overzealous' celebration also became a topic of discussion and a butt of many jokes. His teammates mimicked the celebration amid waves of laughter in the dressing room. To avoid any trouble, Zachary had to pretend not to be hearing anything and busy himself with sipping on his water.

"Okay, guys," Coach Johansen said, his gaze sweeping over the entire dressing room. "Let's focus and discuss the main points of our game plan in the second half. Please take your seats."

When all the players took their seats, Coach Johansen started giving his half-time pep talk. He didn't make any marked changes in the tactics or the overall game plan for the second half. He only insisted that the players remain focused and make sure they didn't concede throughout the remainder of the game.

Additionally, he outlined what he needed from each field player, especially the defenders and midfielders, before sending them back to the pitch for the second half.

The mood in the home team's dressing room was entirely different from that of Rosenborg's. All the players and coaching staff of Strindheim had dejected looks about them.

Some were frowning, others smiling ruefully, while the rest had their heads held between their hands like they'd suffered personal tragedies. They seemed to have given up on the game after conceding the three goals against Rosenborg during the first half.

Coach Finn Morten Moe frowned slightly on seeing the condition of his players. "Okay, guys," he said, starting to move around the dressing room. "Let's forget the first half."

"Let's begin the second half like we're 'just' starting the game afresh. Forget that we're 3:0 down. Let's begin anew and play at our best during the remainder of the game. Are you with me, guys?" He yelled at the top of his voice.

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

The coach nodded on seeing some of his players regain some vigor. "We'll continue playing a 4-5-1 formation for the second half. The five midfielders will have to try their level best to close down all the spaces in the midfield. They'll also have to help in defending. We don't want to concede any other goal. That's our first objective."

"Let's start the second half by taking the Rosenborg midfielders out of the equation. I agree that they are talented players. However, they still lack the necessary experience to adapt to shifts in the game situation quickly. So, use your brain to keep them on their toes. Vary your playing style from one

moment to the next. When they expect short passes, play it high. When they think we're about to penetrate through the middle, play it through the wing."

"Emil, Sindre, and Preben," the coach continued, letting his gaze settle momentarily upon the three players. "You're our midfielders. Your job is to stop their midfielders from playing freely and limiting their impact on the game. But you haven't fulfilled your roles so far. In the second half, try to play like men. Rough those young midfielders a bit and don't allow them an inch of space."

"Preben, take note of that tall African. You allowed him to play at his own pace in the first half. That can't happen again in the second half. Make sure you mark him tightly. Annoy him if you want to. But you can't let him keep in control of the midfield. Are we together?"

"Yes, coach," Preben replied solemnly.

"Okay, guys," Coach Finn Morten Moe said, smiling slightly. "Let's go out there and play at our best. Let's not leave any regrets on the pitch. Are you with me?"

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

When the second half started, Zachary instantly discerned that Strindheim had tightened their midfield. The Strindheim players were—still arrayed in the 4-5-1 formation. However, they were more compact and more aggressive than they'd been in the first half. They would run at any player about to receive the ball, giving them no chance to control it without pressure. They reacted like hungry scavengers catching the scent of food for the first time in weeks. They were able to halt Rosenborg's dominance in the middle of the field at the beginning of the half.

But all that didn't faze Zachary in the slightest since he understood there were peaks and lows of team play for any football game. So, he remained patient, continuing to play at his own pace while doing his best to receive and pass the ball as quickly as possible.

He remained as stable as he'd been in the first half, except for not playing the ball forward as frequently as he would have liked. Strindheim's second-half defensive shape limited his options to a greater extent.

All the Rosenborg forwards were tightly marked by Strindheim defenders every single minute. Nicki Nielsen had it especially tough with two center backs shadowing him like bodyguards wherever he went on the field. Zachary couldn't release any defense splitting passes to him.

He and the other Rosenborg midfielders barely had it easier since they had to deal with five Strindheim players in the middle of the field. The only players that had space to play the ball at their own pace without any pressure were the defenders since Strindheim was using only one striker in the second half.

So, Zachary moved back to the defensive midfield in the 60th minute, forming a line with Ole Selnes right in front of Rosenborg's defense. He then started playing short and precise passes with Ole and the defenders in the backfield, enabling Rosenborg to have a spell of possession.

However, that didn't last for long. In the 70th minute, the Strindheim players altered their shape anew, allowing two of their midfielders to move forward and apply more pressure on Rosenborg. Preben Hammersland, Strindheim's attacking midfielder, specifically targeted Zachary even when he didn't have the ball. The midfielder followed him around the pitch, sometimes fouling him and pulling on his shirt to disrupt his control of the midfield.

Zachary was a little annoyed by his antics, especially when the referee failed to call out his fouls. However, he stayed calm and focused on his game.

He was surprised to find out it wasn't too hard to control his emotions while on the field. All he had to do was recall the moment he had scored the goal for all the negativity to fade out of his mind. Although the game had become tougher for Rosenborg, he continued to enjoy his football.

Kristin frowned slightly after glancing at her watch. It was already the eightieth minute, yet Rosenborg had not yet scored another goal. During the first half, she had thought her team would go on to bag at least six goals by the end of the game. However, Strindheim had come out of the dressing room tougher than they had been in the first half.

Since the break, they'd been playing textbook defensive football of isolating the forwards and limiting the mobility of Rosenborg's midfield. They had managed to contain Rosenborg and avoid conceding another goal.

"Oh, my," Kristin heard Anne Rimmen, the commentator, yell. "It's another tackle on Zachary Bemba close to the center of the field. I guess this is it. The referee has finally shown a yellow card to Preben Hammersland, the Strindheim number-8. Harald, what do you think about the fouls the Strindheim players are committing?"

"Well," said Mr. Harald Brattbakk, the other commentator and live pundit for that game. "I wouldn't blame Strindheim for committing a few fouls here and there in the midfield. They're only doing their best to stop Rosenborg from dominating the game and scoring another goal. If they hadn't toughened up and played a man's game in the second half, they would have already conceded three more goals."

"Don't you feel like they're specifically targeting Zachary Bemba with their fouls?" Anne Rimmen inquired.

"That seems to be the case," Mr. Harald Brattbakk replied. "He was the best performing player in the midfield during the first half. He was involved in all of Rosenborg's three goals. If I were the opposing team's coach, I would have also gone after him to destabilize his game. So, we can't blame Strindheim for roughing up Zachary a few times. You can tell that they aren't doing anything malicious—but just trying to limit his time on the ball."

"Well, what do you think the Rosenborg coach should do in such a situation?"

"If I were the Rosenborg coach," said Mr. Harald Brattbakk, "My priority would be protecting Zachary at all costs. We have all seen that he's quite the talented player. You wouldn't want to lose such an asset on his debut game due to some injury. Since less than eight minutes are remaining on the clock, I'm guessing that there will be a substitution pretty soon. And Zachary will probably be the player leaving the field of play."

"Well, thank you, Mr. Harald," Anne Rimmen said. "Let's get back to the game, which has just restarted after that foul on Zachary Bemba. And as Mr. Harald has predicted, Mix Diskerud, Rosenborg's often-starting midfielder, has started warming up along the touchline. Maybe, we'll see Zachary, the young but talented central midfielder, off the pitch within the next few minutes."

Kristin sighed and returned her attention to the pitch.

On the pitch, Zachary noticed that Mix Diskerud had started warming up. At that instant, he knew that the coach would be taking him off the field in a few minutes.

However, he remained calm and composed and continued to play at his own pace. He understood that coaches hated jumpy players who tried out risky plays so late in the game.

Rosenborg had already won the game, and that was all that mattered. Zachary could feel that his teammates were simply managing the game to prevent Strindheim from scoring any goals. There was no reason for him to be so hung up about finishing the entire duration of the match since he'd already earned his appearance bonus for that day.

Moreover, he already knew that he'd put on a good performance for that game since he had been involved in all Rosenborg's three goals. That seemed sufficient to get him into the squad of the next match. As long as he continued getting playing time, he was sure he would be able to seal a spot on the starting line-up. So, he continued playing calmly until the referee blew the whistle, calling for his substitution.