

## **Greatest 121**

### Chapter 121 - The Match Ends

The Rosenborg players controlled the game well in the final minutes to extend their lead against Strindheim Idrettslag. Just after Zachary left the field, Nicki Nielsen scored an unexpected goal from a difficult position. The number-9 leaped high to connect with a cross from John Chibuike and powered a header towards goal from right outside the box.

Ole Naess, the Strindheim keeper, didn't react quickly enough. He could only watch it slip by his outstretched hand and enter the back of the net. Strindheim Idrettslag had conceded yet another goal in the 86th minute. Rosenborg was on fire.

After that, the Rosenborg players slowed down the pace of gameplay to run down the few minutes left on the clock. They wasted time whenever they could, playing short but aimless passes—until the referee blew the final whistle.

At that instant, the stadium exploded into a wave of cheers as Rosenborg fans celebrated their victory. They had managed to keep a clean sheet, win the second-round game 4:0, and qualify for the next round. All the players, including Zachary, were excited and celebrated after the match. They ran all around the field, waving at the away-fans to thank them for their support.

Rosenborg BK would be facing their next opponents in the third round of the Cupen at the end of May. But before then, they would have a very tight schedule. They had to play six Tippeligaen matches in a span of four weeks, starting with Aalesunds the following Saturday.

Everyone was aware that they only had two days to prepare for the away game against Aalesunds Fotballklubb. That was the bare minimum time required for a practical pre-match training regimen. So, no one indulged in the post-match celebrations for too long.

When the bus dropped the Rosenborg players at Lerkendal, they quickly cleaned up and had a team dinner. They made quick work of the food—and in only a few minutes, most of them had packed their bags and returned to their homes. They needed to rest well and ready themselves for the team training the following evening.

Zachary, though, didn't leave immediately. The coach had asked to meet with him in his office after the team dinner. He was surprised by the call at such a late hour, but he still had to comply. The coach had finally given him an opportunity to play on the professional stage, so he was eager to find out what he

had to say. He was hoping to possibly get a commitment from the coach to turn him into a regular, starting from the next game. So, he marched to Coach Johansen's office eagerly after taking a shower.

When he got there, he found the coach making final notes on the just concluded match. Several five-by-seven cards and charts with player formations and movements littered the L-shaped desk in the office. Zachary could even see his name and number-33 jersey circled in yellow on one of the cards. He stared and remained silent, appreciating how difficult a job coaching was. Even after the match was over, coaches didn't forget to make records and analyze them for future reference.

"Have a seat, Zachary," Coach Johansen said, placing down his marker and pointing to the chair beside him.

Zachary smiled and settled into it.

"How do you feel after playing and scoring in your debut match?" The coach inquired, leaning back into his chair and smiling at Zachary.

"Terrific, of course," Zachary replied. "I love football. Playing at the professional stage makes me feel accomplished. So, I would love to participate in a lot more matches."

"That's good to know." The coach nodded. "You played well out there. Keep up the spirit, and you'll surely succeed on this team. Now, let's talk about why I called you here." The coach's gaze turned solemn.

Zachary didn't like the look on the coach's face. He could feel like some bad news was coming. "Coach, is there anything wrong?" He asked, frowning slightly.

"Not at all," Coach Johansen said, shaking his head. "I only want to know how you've been. You seemed pretty detached from the rest of the team before the game. Is there anything that has gone wrong in your life? Did some girl break your heart? What happened to you over the past month?" The coach fired questions slowly but steadily, keeping his eyes locked on Zachary's face.

Zachary was surprised by the direction the conversation was taking. He couldn't believe the coach would decide to have such a talk with him right after his debut match. Nonetheless, he replied genuinely in order to stay in the good books of the coach.

"It was just the frustration of not making the squad for the past two months that was affecting my mood," he said. "However, I'm okay now. Football, always helps me calm down."

"Oh," the coach said, glancing at Zachary pensively. "I didn't know that keeping you off the squad could affect you in such a way."

Zachary smiled ruefully.

He was at a loss for words because he himself couldn't understand what had been the trigger of his anger episodes. He suspected that it could be one of the tragic incidences in his past life or childhood—but he wasn't sure yet. However, he felt it was no longer an issue since he'd started feeling better over the previous week. So, there seemed to be no point in worrying about it.

"You can always come and talk to me if you have any doubts in the future," Coach Johansen said, smiling. "Remember, I'm on your side. I want you to perform and help the team win trophies. But you can't do that while your mind is elsewhere. Okay?"

"Yes, coach." Zachary nodded. "I will do that."

"Okay, great," Coach Johansen said. "That reassures me. Now the next issue. Because you put up an incredible performance today, you'll be in the squad for the Tippeligaen match against Aalesunds next Saturday. You'll start on the bench, but I'll give you a chance to join the game as a substitute."

"Thank you, coach," Zachary replied, smiling. "I'll do my best if given the opportunity."

Coach Johansen nodded. "However, you have to remember that this is a fixture between two clubs in the top four of the Tippeligaen. The intensity will be very different from what you've faced in today's game. That means you'll have to be in an above 95% match condition to partake in that game. For that to happen, you need to go through proper post-match recovery. But that could be challenging since the game is only two days away."

"So, you should pass by the medic tomorrow to have those thighs and calves checked," the coach continued. "They received quite a few knocks, and we don't want them to turn into a problem before Saturday. Since you have just experienced a growth spurt, you should go for the check-ups as regularly as possible. Okay?"

"Yes, coach," Zachary replied. "I'll go tomorrow." Although he felt that he was fully fit, he needed to continue reassuring the coaches by having check-ups. He wouldn't lose anything by doing that, so he 'simply' agreed.

"Good," Coach Johansen said, smiling. "I also called you here to guide you on how to make your post-match recovery more efficient and effective. I know we already covered this back in the academy, but I'll go ahead and discuss it again. You need to take great care to relax your muscles so that they can recover after the match. That is especially very important for you who is just starting out on the professional stage..."

Zachary leaned back in his chair as he continued listening to the coach's advice. For the next few minutes, the coach talked about several popular methods used by professional athletes to enhance recovery after games. He advised Zachary to utilize hydrotherapy, stretching, compression garments, massage, sleep, and nutrition after every game. That way, he would remain in tip-top shape and maintain his form even late in the season.

Zachary already had some prior knowledge about the techniques. So, the discussion went by very quickly. And in about ten minutes, he thanked the coach for his advice and exited the office.

Zachary walked with a spring in his step towards the stadium's exit. He was in a good mood since he already knew that he would be on the squad for the game against Aalesunds Fotballklubb. That, coupled with the fact that he'd managed to score in his debut, made him feel like he was walking on clouds.

When he left the stadium, he hurriedly made his way to the bus stop. He wanted to return to his apartment as soon as possible and begin his post-match recovery session. He didn't come across any other souls until he made it to the Lerkendal bus stop.

It was already ten in the evening, and there wasn't much traffic on the streets of Trondheim. He had to wait thirty minutes for the bus heading to Stj?rdalsveien, the location of his apartment.

As he rode the bus to Stj?rdalsveien, Zachary resolved to buy a car as soon as possible. With a personal vehicle, he would be able to move at his leisure at any time. He could go to Lerkendal at any time and practice without any worry since he would be—assured of his transportation. Zachary found that prospect quite attractive. And since he had the money, he could no longer resist the temptation of obtaining his vehicle.

Bzzt Bzzzt! Bzzt Bzzzt!

Zachary's phone vibrated as the bus pulled into the Stj?rdalsveien bus stop. He hurriedly fished it out of the pocket of his tracksuit as he alighted from the bus. When he was out on the sidewalk, he glanced at the screen—and noticed it was a call from an unknown international number beginning with the area code +33. Although he didn't know to which country the code belonged, he still picked it up anyway.

Chapter 122 - The 2013 Tippeligaen Serial Challenge

"Hello," Zachary spoke into the phone.

"Hello, Zachary," a familiar female voice said from the other end of the line. "It's me, Emily. Just calling to ask how your debut match went."

"Oh, Emily," Zachary said, smiling. He threw his gym bag over his shoulder and started walking towards his apartment. "You called using a different number. I was about to reject the call."

"Then you would have missed out on hearing my lovely voice," Emily countered jokingly.

"So, how are you?" Zachary inquired, wishing to change the direction of the conversation immediately.

"I'm doing well," Emily replied. "But tell me, how did the match go? It wasn't—broadcasted anywhere. So, I couldn't watch it. Sorry about that."

"No problem," Zachary replied, rounding a corner and entering the lane heading to his apartment building. "I played for roughly 80 minutes, managed to score one goal, and also made an assist."

"Oh, my," Emily exclaimed, her voice rising slightly at the other end of the call. "Way to go, Zach. Congratulations. With that, I believe the coaches won't leave you out of the squad anymore."

"I think so too. The coach has even already promised me I'll be part of the squad for the next match."

"When is your next match?"

"Saturday. Next Saturday."

"Oh, no." Emily sighed audibly over the phone call. "I won't be able to make it to that match too. I'll still be in France handling some business. When is the next one after that?"

"Wednesday, May 8th," Zachary replied right away since he'd crammed the next ten fixtures of Rosenborg in his head. "We'll be facing Tromsø Idrettslag at home."

"Great," Emily replied, sounding excited. "I'll surely be there for that game. If you manage to keep performing well, we can start talking about some smaller endorsement deals."

"Okay, that's fine," Zachary replied, starting to ascend the steps of his apartment building. "I'll wait for you, then. What are you doing in France?" He inquired. After hearing Emily mention France, he couldn't help but recall his four country-mates who had departed for the Nantes academy. He wondered how far their skills had progressed after training in France for two years.

"Just some agency business," Emily replied succinctly. "I'll maybe tell you about it when we meet. But, I've got to go now. It's already late. So, try to rest and keep your body healthy. We'll talk more when I'm in Trondheim next week."

"Okay, have a good night then," Zachary said as he reached the door of his apartment. "See you next week."

"Good night," Emily said before hanging up.

Zachary shoved his phone back into his side pocket and unlocked the door to his apartment. He was only thinking of going through his yoga regimen quickly to start his post-match recovery as soon as possible.

He hurriedly slipped out of his sneakers, threw his gym bag to the side, and headed to the living room, where he usually went through his yoga routine. However, a system notification sounded in his mind as he walked into the room.

"DING"

"The system has detected that the user has been added to the Rosenborg's squad playing in the 2013 Tippeligaen season," the system AI's apathetic voice sounded in his mind soon after.

"Conditions for a long-term serial system mission have been met."

"The 2013 Tippeligaen Serial Mission initiated successfully."

"Does the user wish to view the details of the mission right away?"

"Yes, bring out the details now," Zachary replied, settling into one of the sofas in his living room. "But why did you delay to announce the system mission? The coach promised to add me to the squad over forty minutes ago! But the mission notification has just appeared now. Why did it take longer than it usually did?"

"The system has adjusted to the user's behavioral patterns," the AI replied. "The system will only bring out its notifications when the user is where he feels most comfortable and most safe. At this moment, it is this apartment. But the user can choose to override this setting at any time."

"Does the user wish to override this setting?"

"Negative," Zachary replied. Of course, he didn't wish to keep getting notifications when he was in the company of others.

Ever since he'd gone back in time and obtained the system, he had stopped taking the world lightly. He reasoned that since he possessed the system, there was a remote possibility that other people might also possess preternatural talents. It would spell trouble for him if one of those individuals existed and noticed that he had a system. He didn't know whether he was just paranoid. But he decided to remain on the safe side of caution. It was better to be safe than sorry.

"DING"

"Attention user," intoned the AI.

"Mission details have been displayed on the interface."

Zachary leaned back into the sofa and began to peruse through the information displayed on the translucent blue system interface that had appeared before him. He was eager to learn the new mission details.

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G.O.A.T MISSIONS

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#NEW MISSION: 2013 Tippeligaen Serial Challenge

->The system has detected that the user is part of the Rosenborg BK squad partaking in the 2013 Norwegian top division football league, commonly referred to as the Tippeligaen. The system has designed an associated mission for the event.

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



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\*Milestone 1: Play 70% of the fixtures in the 2013 Tippeligaen season. The user must be part of the starting eleven or a playing substitute in at least 21 of the 30 matches of the 2013 Tippeligaen.

\*Milestone 2: Help your teammates become the champions of the 2013 Tippeligaen.

\*Milestone 3: Provide the most assists in the 2013 Tippeligaen season.

\*Milestone 4: Become the top scorer of the 2013 Tippeligaen season.

\*Milestone 5: Become the MVP of the 2013 Tippeligaen season.

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\*Rewards:

->Milestone 1 completion reward: 2000 Juju-points

->Milestone 2 completion reward: 2000 Juju-points

->Milestone 3 completion reward: 4000 Juju-points

->Milestone 4 completion reward: 5000 Juju-points

->Milestone 5 completion reward: A dosage of A-grade vitality enhancing elixir.

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NB: There will be additional rewards if the user realizes any other milestones that can unlock hidden missions.

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

\*Accept \*Reject

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

->Minus 20000 Juju-points

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

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\*Remarks: All progress takes place outside the comfort zone. And no passion can be found playing small—in settling for a life that is less than the one you are capable of living.

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Zachary clicked on the accept button right away. He didn't even try deliberating on whether he would accomplish the minimum of one milestone to escape the penalty.

He just took the gamble and hoped for the best reward. Since the coach had already promised him playing time, he had a high chance of achieving the first milestone at the very least.

Moreover, the reward for the fifth milestone was an A-grade vitality-enhancing elixir. That elixir could heal injuries and even improve his physical fitness attributes by a large margin. He had already consumed a B-grade version of it and understood its benefits quite well. It had healed his injured leg in no time when he had returned to the past some two years prior. He intended to try to achieve the milestone and win the elixir.

"System," Zachary said. "What happens if I incur the penalty and don't have the required Juju-points to pay for it?"

"The penalty will turn into a debt burden for the user," the AI replied. "There will be 100% interest (reducing) added on the debt every year."

"That's too high." Zachary frowned. "Can't it be lower?"

"No, the system has a fixed rate of 100%," the AI replied. "No bargaining is allowed. The user only has to make sure not to incur the penalty. Then everything will be fine."

Zachary smiled wryly on hearing that. It seemed the system didn't tolerate failure in any way. He had noticed that on every mission, there was a penalty of some sort. But that didn't faze him in the slightest. Instead, he was thankful since he needed the pressure to grow his skills quickly.

He closed the system interface after confirming his acceptance of the mission with the AI. He then went through a light session of yoga to stretch his muscles and enhance his post-match recovery process.

When he finished, he soaked in an ice bath to relax his muscles before eating a late-night snack. He didn't consume a lot of food since he'd already eaten dinner back at Lerkendal. Moreover, eating a lot after a match wasn't advisable. So, he only swallowed down a few bananas and energy bars to replenish his diminished stamina reserves.

After eating, he could finally let loose and go to bed. However, he didn't fall asleep right away. Since he had made it onto the regular squad, he needed to keep refining his skills on a daily basis. So, he

activated the G.O.A.T Skills Simulator using two Juju-points and began practicing his Bend-it-like-Beckham Juju for the next hour. He understood that if he hoped to score a good number of goals in the Tippeligaen, he would have to rely on his set-piece technique at some point. So, he was hell-bent on improving it to the highest level humanly possible.

#### Chapter 123 - Preparations For The Next Game

The following day Zachary woke up at 8:00 AM and continued with his post-match recovery routine. After sleeping like a baby for the entire night, his body had started to recuperate from the match fatigue. But, he knew he had to put in a lot more effort in order to return to his peak state in only two days.

So, he resolved to use every minute before the match against Aalesunds to return to top shape. He followed Coach Johansen's instructions and started his day with another light yoga routine to stretch his sore muscles. He didn't attempt anything overly complicated. He limited himself to poses like the downward-facing dog posture that stimulated blood circulation, especially in the lower limbs.

When he finished the yoga regimen, he drank some tart cherry juice and chocolate milk to restore the glycogen in his body. That was to reduce the oxidative stress he'd accumulated from the previous day's match, stimulating muscle repair and recovery.

He had always understood that without proper nutrition, all the recovery techniques in the world were ineffectual. So, ever since his academy days, he had always eaten a proper diet along with a weekly dose of the physical conditioning elixir from the system to recover faster from fatigue.

Since joining the ranks of professional football players, he had grown even more strict with himself. He intended to continue the same habit to prevent himself from suffering chronic fatigue later on in the season. So, he didn't just stop at drinking juice and chocolate milk for breakfast. He also feasted on vegetables, meat, and bread. Afterward, he soaked into a cold bath for fifteen minutes and took a shower before setting off for Lerkendal.

He arrived there at around 9:00 AM. By then, a few senior players like Mikael Dorsin and Borek Dockal, who hadn't taken part in the previous day's match, were already on the pitch working with the ball. Zachary said hello to them before continuing to the gym.

He was surprised to find Mr. Rolf Aas, the fitness coach, already in the gym, instructing a few players. Zachary could tell he was guiding them on post-match recovery. The likes of Ole Seln?s, Brede Moe, and Tore Reginiussen were all carefully applying pressure on their thighs and calves using the foam rollers on the floor.

"Zachary, you're here," Mr. Rolf Aas, said smiling on noticing him at the door. "Good morning! Why not join us in our session? You know with exercise, the more, the merrier."

"Good morning, coach," Zachary first greeted the coach before adding: "Of course, I'll join in. Let me change into my training gear first." He walked to the dressing room to change.

Mr. Rolf Aas was one of the most skilled fitness coaches in Norway. Zachary couldn't reject an opportunity to participate in an active post-match recovery session directed by him. So, he spent the next hour in one of the Rosenborg gyms working his body over a foam roller. At the end of the session, he felt more relaxed and refreshed. The foam rolling had helped relieve the tension in his sore muscles and stimulated their recovery from the match fatigue faster.

Zachary thanked the fitness coach and said goodbye before leaving the gym to take another cold bath. He was intent on recovering faster than everyone else on the team.

He didn't want to waste any second of his time. So, he rested for only an hour after attending the match video review meeting that morning before going through another active recovery routine in the gym.

By the time the team training session started later that evening, he was full of energy. He felt like he could play another match immediately. A soft smile outlined his face as he marched to the training ground that evening. His efforts had paid off. He had almost fully recovered.

The team practice session began at 3:30 PM. Zachary was in high gear and gave everything he had. He breezed through agilities, running as if his life depended on it—while others moaned and groaned, still sore from the previous day's exertions. Only the players that had remained on the bench could match his pace when going through the drills.

He didn't care one bit about the few unfriendly looks from teammates suggesting that he back down because he was making everyone look like slackers. That was his intention. He was competing for a position on the starting line-up and had to outshine his teammates at all costs.

As practice went on, Zachary got more confident in his stamina. He realized that the slight post-match fatigue that had still lingered and bagged him at the beginning of the session had vanished. So, he upped

the intensity with—which he approached the drills until the coaches called him out and requested him to slow down a bit.

He had to explain that he'd already recovered, for them to let him be. But that was on the condition that he saw the team physician before the end of the day. Zachary, though, wasn't the least bit afraid of being subjected to another physical fitness medical check-up once more. He knew his body well and was sure there would be no problems with the medical. So, he maintained a high level of intensity until training ended that day.

The next day, which was a Friday, he went through a similar routine. He woke up early, did yoga, stretched using a foam roller, and went through the team training prepared by the coaches to refine the game plan for the match against Aalesunds the following day.

Throughout the entire day, he was in a state of intense focus. He followed the instructions of the coaching staff to the letter throughout all the sessions. When they said run, he ran, and when they yelled pass, he passed. The hours passed by quickly, and before he knew it, it was evening.

It was finally time for Coach Johansen to announce the squad for the following day. Zachary made his way to the tactics room after taking a shower. He sank into a seat at the very back of the room and waited silently for the coach to begin his address.

"Good evening to you all," Coach Johansen said to the players when they had all finished taking their seats in the Rosenborg tactics room.

"Good evening, coach," all the players replied, more or less in unison. They'd stopped chattering and had their attention focused solely on the coach.

Coach Johansen nodded. "Tomorrow, we play Aalesunds FK away at the Color Line Stadion," he said. "This is a tough fixture, and we'll have to give more than a hundred percent if we want to get maximum points."

"You all know that we can't afford to lose another game in the Tippeligaen. So, we have to play as a team and win this game. Otherwise, our chances at contesting for the league title this season will greatly lessen. Are we together, guys?" He yelled, sweeping his gaze across the players.

"Yes, coach."

"Let me just ask you one thing," the coach continued, a soft smile outlining his face. "Who is the strongest, physically, here?"

All the players, including Zachary, remained silent, under the impression that the coach had asked a rhetorical question.

"Come on, don't be shy," the coach said jokingly. "Okay, who thinks he's strong enough to bully any opponent out there using just his physique?"

A wave of light laughter cut across the room as some of the players raised their arms. Coach Johansen pointed to one of them. "Tore, I also believe you are quite strong," he said. "Too bad you're still on suspension and can't be part of tomorrow's game." The coach sighed. "But please do come here for a moment. Let's do this real quick so that we can go back to planning for the game."

The captain marched to the front of the tactics room confidently—amid cheers and whistles of his teammates.

"We have twelve pencils in this box," Coach Johansen said, raising the pencils and showing them to his players. "Tore, take the first pencil and break it into two. Come on, show me that grip strength of yours." He instructed, pumping his fist as if to cheer Tore on.

Tore Reginiussen, of course, followed the coach's instructions. He took the pencil and broke it into two as his teammates cheered him on in a joking manner.

"Okay, I see you're the man, Tore." Coach Johansen smiled, patting the captain's back. "Now, please take these eleven pencils and try to break them apart, like the first one." He said, handing him the set of pencils.

Zachary smiled, facepalming when he saw Tore Reginiussen take the pencils from the coach and use all his strength, trying to break them apart. However, as expected, his efforts were in vain. The pencils remained intact, however much he tried.

"The result is obvious to you all, I believe," Coach Johansen said, signaling Tore to go back to his seat. "If we play as individuals, we'll be as weak as the first pencil. The opponents will easily break us apart. But, if we play as a team of eleven, nothing can break us." He held out the eleven pencils for all to see.

"Nothing can break us if we play as a team. Strength comes from numbers. Every player brings a unique aspect to the game, and together—the team is like a well-oiled machine showcasing phenomenal football. Are we together, guys?"

"Yes, coach," all the players replied in chorus. Zachary could tell the mood in the tactics room had turned from solemn to relaxed after the coach's pencil talk.

"Okay, great," the coach said. "I want us to take that spirit to Color Line Stadion tomorrow. I guarantee you guys that we'll walk away with three points from that game if we're true to that. Are we on the same page, guys?"

"Yes, coach."

"Okay." Coach Johansen nodded. "Now on to the squad. Although Aalesunds plays with a 4-4-2 formation, we shall still use our default 4-3-3 to face them tomorrow." He pointed at the large screen in front of the room where the formation had just appeared.

"We'll play attacking football and focus on scoring goals throughout the entire game. Remember, like we said earlier today, offense is the best defense. So, I expect everyone to be agile on the pitch..."

Zachary listened intently for the next few minutes as Coach Johansen expounded on the game plan and tactics. Although he had already heard them during the training session that evening, Zachary listened carefully to catch any new points that came up. The seconds and minutes passed by quickly, and soon, the coach started announcing the squad.

"For the starting eleven," the coach said, pointing at the screen. "We have Lund Hansen as the keeper. Mikael Dorsin, Verner Rønning, Stefan Strandberg, and Cristian Gamboa as the four defenders. Mike Jensen, Mix Diskerud, and Jonas Svensson as the three midfielders. And finally, we have Tobias Mikkelsen, Tarik Elyounoussi, and Borek Dockal as the three forwards."



"On the bench," the coach continued. "We have Daniel ?rlund, Brede Moe, Jon Inge H?iland, Ole Selnaes, Zachary Bemba, Daniel Berntsen, and John Chibuike. That's it for the squad."

Zachary smiled on hearing his name among the squad members. He wasn't the least bit disturbed by the fact that he was only a substitute. There was nothing to worry about since the coach had already promised to give him playing time during the match.

"Any questions?" Coach Johansen inquired, glancing around after he finished announcing the squad.

All the players, including Zachary, remained silent.

"Well, then," the coach said, clapping his hands. "Let's call it a day then..."

"Just one moment, please," Trond Henriksen, the assistant head coach, interrupted him before he could send off the players.

"Yes, Trond," Coach Johansen said.

"I would like to remind all of the players here that the journey to ?lesund is quite a long one," Trond Henriksen said, taking on a formal tone. "We'll need about six hours to travel from Lerkendal to the Color Line Stadion. So, we'll be departing by bus from the parking lot of Lerkendal at 8:30 AM sharp. Please come early and don't be late. Thank you."

"Thank you, Trond," Coach Johansen said, smiling. "I guess that marks the end of today's session. If you didn't make the squad, keep working hard and don't give up. Your turn will come sooner than you expect if you stay true to your goals. For the players on the squad, have a good night's sleep, and see you tomorrow. And, of course, don't be late." He clapped his hand for emphasis.

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Chapter 124 - Against Aalesunds Fotballklubb

"AALESUNDS, \*clap\*clap\*, AALESUNDS, \*clap\*clap..."

In the Rosenborg technical area, Coach Johansen's frown deepened as the chanting and clapping of the Aalesunds FK home fans rose to a crescendo. His team had just conceded a second goal in the 52nd of the game.

Fredrik Ulvestad, the right-midfielder in Aalesunds' 4-4-2 diamond formation, had just unleashed a shot at goal from outside the 18-yard-box. He had managed to beat Lund Hansen, the Rosenborg goalkeeper, scoring the second goal for the men in orange and blue.

Things were looking bad for Rosenborg as the second half progressed. They were two goals down with only about thirty-five minutes left on the clock. Coach Johansen's face had long morphed into a scary frown as he observed the goings-on on the field.

His team had arrived in Ålesund Town in high spirits that afternoon. All the players had been in top shape as they warmed up and prepared for the match. Even the absence of top stars Nicki Nielsen and Tore Reginiussen due to suspension had seemed trivial at the time. They'd been in great shape before the game started. Coach Johansen had been pleased with their energy levels—and thought they would grab the three points from Aalesunds FK. That would have marked the perfect start to their ascent back to the top of the Tippeligaen table.

However, he couldn't have been more wrong.

As soon as the game started, the Rosenborg players had found it challenging to settle down and play their usual fast-flowing attack-minded football. Many of their usually successful coordinated plays became misses due to a lack of focus on the field. They started losing possession intermittently and conceded the first goal in the 26th minute of the first half.

Coach Johansen had not lost his cool over that single goal. He knew very well, from experience, that any strong team could experience below-par performance spells during a game and find themselves trailing their opponents. However, what mattered most was the way players reacted after encountering the situation.

So, during the halftime break, he had given a motivational pep talk about focusing and giving more than a hundred percent effort to stage a comeback in the dressing room. The field players had reacted well to it, putting his mind at ease. So, he had returned to the visiting team's dugout for the second half with a smile on his face. He was sure his players had straightened their attitude and would do their utmost to score and win in the second half. However, seven minutes into the second half, Rosenborg had conceded yet again.

Coach Johansen was close to suffocating on his fury. His players had made yet another amateur mistake allowing Aalesunds to score once again. "What to do?" He mumbled to himself, rubbing his bald head in frustration.

His mind worked in overdrive, trying to come up with a solution to Rosenborg's on-pitch tactical problems. All the while, his eyes followed every play on the field as his mind tried to find a spark that could light up the way and help his team stage a comeback. The worst result he could tolerate against Aalesunds FK was a draw. If Rosenborg lost another game, he would be in deep trouble and probably be at risk of being fired by the end of the following week. He couldn't lose.

\*FWEEEEEEEE\*

The referee blew the whistle, breaking him out of his deep state of concentration.

"That's no foul and no yellow card," Coach Johansen shouted at the top of his lungs, punching the air before him repeatedly. Mike Jensen, the Rosenborg defensive midfielder, had just made a sliding tackle against Fredrik Carlsen, Aalesunds number-8, close to the edge of the box. The referee had shown a yellow card to Mike for his overly aggressive challenge and awarded Aalesunds FK a freekick at the edge of the box.

"I don't know what the matter with referees is these days," Coach Johansen complained to Trond Henriksen, his assistant. "That shouldn't have even been a foul. But the referee has gone ahead and shown Mike a yellow card! I don't understand." Coach Johansen scratched his red beard in frustration as he kept his eyes locked on the field of play.

Trond Henriksen smiled wryly, shaking his head. "Maybe we should start thinking about bringing in another striker so that we can create more chances at goal," he said, his tone imploring. "What do you think?"

"I've my considerations," Coach Johansen replied, keeping his eyes focused on the field. "Let's first watch the freekick. We'll decide what to do from there."

"Okay, then," Trond Henriksen, the assistant head coach of Rosenborg, replied, nodding. He also returned his gaze to the field of play.

\*\*\*\* \*

Zachary was watching the game from the visitor's dugout. He was surprised by how the on-pitch situation had swiftly gone from bad to worse for Rosenborg as the match progressed. He couldn't understand why the players seemed unable to connect well on the field of play. During training, they'd worked together, playing fluid flowing football. But out there in the game, they were being owned by a weaker team. He felt frustrated since he didn't want to see his team lose a game just after he'd made it onto the squad.

"Facing our former coach is really problematic," Zachary heard Brede Moe, the substitute defender, comment from his left. "Jan Jönsson knows us well in and out. It's no surprise that he was able to devise effective tactics to mess up our game plan."

"But that's no reason for us to concede two goals," Daniel Carlsson, the veteran goalkeeper, chipped in. "We haven't even created any clear chances at goal. I guess Nicki and Tore's suspension messed up our team cohesion."

"I don't think so," John Chibuike, the substitute forward, said. "It's just one of those days when things don't work out. We're still dominating possession, but we can't seem to find opportunities to score. On the other hand, Aalesunds only has three shots on target but two goals."

Zachary kept on listening but also kept a keen eye on the happenings on the pitch. At the edge of Rosenborg's box, Fredrik Carlsen, the Aalesunds number-8, took a few steps back—away from the ball. He was readying himself to take the freekick.

Before him, five Rosenborg players had already formed a wall to defend against the setpiece. Zachary saw that Rosenborg was in a bad situation since the freekick had been awarded in a dangerous position. Fredrik Carlsen, the Aalesunds attacking midfielder, had just placed the ball in the arc right outside the 18-yard-box. He could use either foot to find the target and widen Aalesunds' lead.

\*FWEEEEEEE\*

The referee blew the whistle. Fredrik Carlsen jogged towards the ball and took the freekick with the inside of his right boot. He unleashed a curling ball around the defense that tore towards the goal like a

missile. The Aalesunds number-8 had taken the freekick well. Tensions ran high in the visiting team's dugout. Conceding another goal would almost certainly seal Rosenborg's loss.

However, Lund Hansen, the Rosenborg keeper, was very alert and came to the rescue. He leaped high and made a brilliant save, shoving the ball out of play with an outstretched arm. Rosenborg had survived conceding another goal. Most of the players on the bench let out sighs of relief.

But the danger wasn't over yet. The referee pointed towards the corner flag, awarding Aalesunds FK a corner kick. The benchwarmers, including Zachary, could only wait anxiously for Rosenborg to defend against the corner. Since they were not on the pitch, there was nothing much they could do to change the game situation. They could only cheer on their team and hope for the best without touching the ball. That was the sorrow of a benchwarmer.

The referee blew the whistle—and without any delay, Andreas Nordvik, the Aalesunds left-back, took the corner.

Zachary watched with rapt attention as Andreas delivered a teasing corner ball towards the crowded box. The players in the box were shoving and pulling at each other—as they struggled to out-muscle one another and answer the incoming cross. The situation in the box was chaotic, but the referee didn't blow the whistle.

Zachary could only hold his breath as he watched the situation in the area with distress. Abderazak Hamdallah, the Aalesunds number-9, jumped high and connected with the cross after losing his mark. He let loose a header from around the penalty spot, clearly bound for the inside the right post.

Zachary felt his heartbeat quicken as he realized the keeper was already—beaten. He could judge that the header would probably result in a goal. But to his relief, Mikael Dorsin, the Rosenborg veteran defender, appeared at the right time. He intercepted the ball close to the goal post and kicked it away to safety.

Rosenborg had survived once more. But, the excitement on the field wasn't over yet. Mike Jensen, the Rosenborg defensive midfielder, picked up the ball from Mikael's clearance around the edge of the box. Without any dilly-dallying, he looked up and unleashed a grounded through-pass in the direction of Tobias Mikkelsen, who'd long started making a run towards Aalesunds half.

The counterattack was on.

Tobias Mikkelsen, the Rosenborg left-forward, turned around and controlled the ball well close to the centerline on the left flank. Around him were yards of space to work with since most of the defenders were still in Rosenborg's half after the corner. So, without any delay, Tobias took off towards the Aalesunds box like a rocket. He was so fast that none of the two defenders that had stayed back to defend could match his pace.

Tobias sprinted—and in no time, was at the edge of Aalesunds box. He made a cut-back pass to the edge of the box where Mix Diskerud, the Rosenborg attacking midfielder, had just arrived.

Mix Diskerud did well to control the pass at the edge of the box. He then unleashed a shot towards the roof of the net without any pressure. All the players on the bench, including Zachary, stood up, anticipating a goal since that was by far Rosenborg's best chance from the start of the game.

However, the goddess of luck seemed to have abandoned Rosenborg that day. Although the Aalesunds goalkeeper was out of position, he still managed to leap high and make a brilliant save. Rosenborg squandered the chance to score their first goal during the 59th minute of the highly contested Tippeligaen game. The players and the coaching staff in the visiting team's dugout all let loose sighs at the missed opportunity.

Zachary was about to return to his seat on the bench—but then noticed that Coach Johansen seemed to be regarding him with a pensive expression. A jolt of excitement straightened his spine. He felt the slight displeasure he'd felt watching Rosenborg put up a sorry performance slipping away at that moment. He could guess that the coach was about to make a substitution.

But he wasn't sure whether the coach would still keep his promise and give him playing time even when the team was trailing by two goals. So, he could only try to express that he was ready by making eye contact with the coach.

"Okay, Zachary and John, you are up," Coach Johansen intoned. "Dress up and start warming up right away. You have five minutes to get ready."

"Yes, coach," Zachary replied, taking on the tone of a soldier answering the command of his superior. He looked comical and attracted a few laughs from his teammates on the bench. However, he didn't mind in the slightest.

He was finally going to make his first appearance in the Tippeligaen. Nothing else mattered as long as he could play football on the professional stage. A soft smile outlined his face as he tightened the laces of his boots and readied himself to begin warming up. He could hardly contain his happiness.

#### Chapter 125 - The Dangerous Substitute I

"Zachary and John, I mainly want you to do two things once you get on the field," intoned coach Johansen, gazing at them intently. They had just finished dressing up after their warm-up. They were already in their full black Rosenborg away-jerseys, ready to enter the field.

"Number one: The two of you should try to connect with the rest of your teammates so that our football can flow again," the coach continued. "That means that you'll have to be involved in the build-up and play a lot of one-twos with the center forward and the other midfielders to create goal-scoring opportunities." He raised his voice slightly to make himself heard over the cheers of the Aalesunds' fans.

"Especially you, Zachary; I want to see creativity in the final third as we pressure the opponents. Make sure you keep the football flowing in the attacking midfield. Use quick but precise passing to break down their diamond-shaped midfield. Give it your all, Zachary, and let's start by dominating that midfield. Are we together?"

"Yes, coach," Zachary replied while doing arm stretches. He was utilizing every minute before entering the game to warm up his body in the proper way. That would minimize the risk of getting injuries on the field of play.

"John," the coach said, turning to the substitute forward from Nigeria. "Try to make runs behind their defensive line whenever you get the chance. I'm sure that Zachary will always try to release you as quickly as possible whenever you show the intention of making a run. When you receive the ball in the final third, link up with the other forwards, and do your best to keep their defense on tenterhooks. Are we together, John?"

"Aye, coach," John Chibuike replied.

"Task number two," said the coach after stealing a glance at the proceedings on the pitch. "I want the two of you to try shooting at goal whenever you get a chance. Zachary, if you spot the keeper of his line from 20 yards away, release that heavy shot of yours. John, the same goes for you. Try to test the keeper as much and possible by making many attempts. That's the only way to get a chance to score and begin our comeback. Are we clear?"

"Yes, coach."

"Zachary," Coach Johansen continued, placing an arm on his shoulder. "When you get on the field, inform Mikael to play with a high line right away. Also, tell him that he can start moving forward along the flanks to help John during our attacks. Make sure you let him know that I expect good crosses from him into the box. Okay?"

"Yes, coach," Zachary replied.

Coach Johansen nodded. "Any questions?" He swept his gaze momentarily across Zachary and Chibuike.

"No, coach."

"No, coach. Everything is clear."

"Okay, then," Coach Johansen said, nodding. "Go ahead and join the game. I wish you good luck, and may we win the game. Make sure you do your best." He slapped both their backs before pushing them towards the fourth official, who was already on the touchline, waiting to make the substitution.

\*FWEEEEEEE\*

The referee blew the whistle and motioned for an Aalesunds' throw-in. The fourth official finally got the chance to put up the board, calling for substitutions.

Zachary replaced Mike Jensen, the defensive midfielder who had already received a yellow card. John Chibuike, on the other hand, came in for Tobias Mikkelsen, the left-winger that hadn't performed at his best since the beginning of the match.



Zachary first ran to Mikael Dorsin and whispered the coach's message in his ear before taking his place in the right midfield, close to the centerline. Meanwhile, Jonas Svensson, the player that had previously occupied that position, moved a few yards back and took up a spot in the defensive midfield. John Chibuike, on the other hand, settled on the left flank. In just a few seconds, Rosenborg had adjusted their formation to a wide 4-1-2-3 formation with the addition of the two substitutes.

Zachary took a cursory glance around the pitch as he waited for the throw-in. He noticed that the Aalesunds FK players were still—arrayed in the 4-4-2 formation. He wasn't surprised, considering that they'd been using the arrangement from the beginning of the match. They hadn't even made any substitution or adjusted their game plan since they were ahead by two goals.

Since Zachary had been watching the game from the sidelines, he didn't spend much time analyzing the positioning of the players. He'd done that while still on the bench and could easily make a mental map of both teammates and opponents in his mind. So, without any worries and with a calm mind, he returned his attention to Hugues Wembangomo, his countrymate from Kinshasha, who was about to take the throw-in for Aalesunds FK.

\*FWEEEEEEE\*

The referee blew the whistle. Hugues Wembangomo, the Aalesund's FK right back, threw the ball along the line, trying to find Fredrik Ulvestad, the right midfielder. The latter ran along the line, trying to connect with it, but all was in vain. Mikael Dorsin, the Rosenborg left-back, beat him to it. He slid in and tapped the ball out of play with an outstretched left foot.

The linesman raised his flag, signaling for another Aalesunds throw-in. However, the men in orange and blue were not in a hurry to take it. They made sure to waste a bit of time before restarting the game once again.

Zachary could tell they'd started managing the game to run down the clock since it was already the 64th minute. They hoped to slow down the tempo and prevent Rosenborg from gaining momentum and scoring a goal.

However, none of the Rosenborg players would stand for that. After Hugues Wembangomo took the second throw-in, Mikael Dorsin sprang into action right away. He out-muscled Fredrik Ulvestad, the

Aalesunds number-23, and headed the ball towards the defensive midfield where Jonas Svensson was waiting.

Jonas Svensson, the Rosenborg defensive midfielder, reacted immediately and connected with the ball, directing it towards the right flank with a deft second touch.

Cristian Gamboa, the right-back, received it close to the touchline in the right-wing with a simple but skillful first touch. Without any pause, he then started sprinting towards Aalesunds half. He was quite a fast player and managed to dash past Fredrik Carlsen, the Aalesunds left midfielder, before continuing to the other side of the field.

#### Chapter 126 - The Dangerous Substitute II

Zachary reacted immediately on seeing Christian Gamboa, the right-back, running with the ball. He lost his marker, opened himself up within the midfield, and started matching Gamboa's run. All the while, he made sure to stay in parallel sync with the right-back as he raced towards Aalesunds' half through the center of the field.

The latter noticed him a few seconds later and relinquished the ball to him.

Zachary received Gamboa's pass as he stepped into Aalesunds' half. He then continued sprinting towards Aalesunds' half as if his life depended on it.

He intended to fulfill the coach's expectations of him by first helping Rosenborg dictate the game's tempo. So, he ran with the ball to attract the attention of the opposing midfielders and create space for his teammates.

Jason Morrison, the Aalesunds defensive midfielder, soon came to close him down. However, Zachary didn't try to dribble past the defensive midfielder since he was still conscious of the fact that he was new to the Tippeligaen.

So, he looked across the field and then let loose a grounded through pass towards the left flank, where John Chibuike was waiting. He didn't halt his run—but circumvented Jason Morrison and continued pushing on towards Aalesunds' box.

In the meantime, John Chibuike, the Rosenborg left-forward, controlled the ball like the pro he was on the left flank before speeding off into a wavy run towards Aalesunds box.

Hugues Wembangomo, the right-back, tried to tackle him and pulled at his shirt as he cut into the pitch towards the goal. However, his speed was no match for the Rosenborg number-10 from Nigeria. John Chibuike flicked the ball forward with his left boot and beat the Aalesunds right-back for pace. He was soon bearing down on their goal with only two opposing center backs standing between him and the goalkeeper.

John Chibuike, though, was in a tight angle and didn't try to shoot and score. Instead, he let loose a lofted pass into the middle of the box where Tarik Elyounoussi, Rosenborg's center forward, was lurking.

The pass into the box found Tarik Elyounoussi unmarked. Without any delay, he carefully placed a shot towards the bottom right corner. However, the Aalesunds goalkeeper made a brilliant last-ditch save, pushing the ball slightly away from the goal with his fingertips.

Nevertheless, Rosenborg's chance wasn't over yet. The ball smashed off the right post and bounced back into the field of play. The situation in the box soon turned chaotic as players in both black and orange jerseys chased after the ball.

Regardless, John Chibuike made it there first. He managed to get to the ball before any other player and unleashed another shot at goal with his left foot.

An Aalesunds defender sprung into its path and blocked the ball, deflecting it away from the goal. Tensions were running high in the box. All the players in the area turned to chase after the ball. But it was already far beyond them heading to the outside of the 18-yard-box.

Zachary had not joined the fray inside the area. Instead, he'd positioned himself at the edge of the 18-yard-box and waited for an opportunity. He was a gambler by nature and was simply betting on the ball coming towards him when he picked out the spot. However, the goddess of luck seemed to not be on his side that day. He had been waiting for a few seconds, yet the ball was still in Aalesunds' box. He'd been getting impatient.

However, when he was about to head into the box and struggle for the ball with the rest of his teammates, he finally saw it deflect off a defender and come towards his direction. He smiled inwardly, thinking that he'd finally won a gamble once again.

But an instant later, he realized the ball was coming to him on an awkward trajectory—at above the head-level. With his A-graded spatial awareness, he deduced that it would land behind him in nothing more than a flash. Furthermore, he could easily infer that he needed to jump high and chest the ball to the ground—before unleashing a shot at goal. But the opposing defenders would never give him that time when he was so close to their box. Thus, he made a snap decision at that juncture, choosing to try out something he'd never attempted before.

With his heart racing and adrenaline flooding his system, he turned around—and tracked after the ball's trajectory using his peripheral vision. When he judged that it had started its descent, he pushed off the ground with his left foot, launching and flipping himself into mid-air to meet it on the back-volley.

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"What the f\*ck?!" Coach Johansen could not help but swear out loud on seeing what had happened on the pitch. With eyes wide, mouth agape, he watched the tall Zachary contort his six-foot-four frame mid-air and dip his upper body backward for an audacious bicycle kick just outside the 18-yard box.

Coach Johansen couldn't believe it.

Zachary seemed to hang in the air for an implausibly long time before making the perfect timing and sweetest of connections with the ball that had just deflected off the defender. What followed was an incredible upside-down finish with the boot above his head.

Coach Johansen was shocked beyond measure as he watched the ball whizz above the players in the box before nestling into the back of the net.

EXCITEMENT! SHOCK! And then EXCITEMENT once again! That summarized Coach Johansen's state of mind at that moment.

2:1.

Rosenborg had managed to pull one back in the 67th minute. The few Rosenborg fans that had traveled to Ålesund to watch the game all started cheering a moment later. They seemed to have taken a second or two to recover from the shock of seeing Zachary's stunning goal.

The corners of Coach Johansen's lips curled into a soft smile as he watched Zachary hurriedly collect the ball from the net and return it to the center spot even without celebrating. He was glad the boy still knew that the priority was equalizing the score as quickly as possible. It seemed that Rosenborg had a chance to make a comeback. He could feel it.

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Chapter 127 - Zinedine-Pirlo Mental Juju In Action I

\*FWEEEEEE\*

All the players had taken their starting positions on the field. The referee looked around the pitch one more time before blowing the whistle and motioning for the match to restart.

Leke James, one of Ålesunds' forwards, kicked the ball back to his half, starting the game once again. Jason Morrison, the defensive midfielder in Ålesunds' 4-4-2 diamond formation, picked the ball up deep in his half—and instantly played it towards Hugues Wembangomo, the right-back. For the next few seconds, the Ålesunds players passed the ball around their backfield, trying their best to slow down the game's tempo.

However, Rosenborg was having none of that. Their players swarmed into Ålesunds' half like locusts and closed down nearly all the passing routes of the opponents. They played like they had consumed a dose of some freakish energy-enhancing elixir. They were in overdrive.

Whenever an Ålesunds player touched the ball, a Rosenborg opponent would be upon him instantly, forcing him to relinquish it to a teammate. If the other player received the resultant pass, another Rosenborg player would also do the same.

Nonetheless, the Ålesunds players remained patient and continued trying to pass the ball in their backfield even under pressure. However, the Rosenborg players also didn't let up the heat.

They continued using high-pressing tactics while compressing their 4-3-3 formation to narrow down the spaces in the middle. Rosenborg continued creating an intense atmosphere around whichever opponent had the ball, making it difficult for the Aalesunds players to distribute or receive passes.

That way, team Rosenborg managed to force their opponents to play the ball high and long towards their two forwards. But that was what Zachary and his teammates had been anticipating.

Verner Rønning, Rosenborg's center back, sprang into action and intercepted the long ball before the two Aalesunds forwards could reach it. He headed it back to Lund Hansen, the keeper.

Rosenborg had regained possession for the first time after scoring the goal. Lund Hansen didn't dilly-dally, though. He ran towards the edge of the box and made a long throw towards the left flank where Mikael Dorsin, the Rosenborg number-3, was waiting.

Mikael received the ball with a deft touch and let loose a cut-back pass to the middle of the field—in the direction of Jonas Svensson, the Rosenborg defensive midfielder.

On seeing Jonas Svensson receive the ball, Zachary ran into an open space beyond the zone of intense rival pressure. Jonas spotted him an instant later and passed the ball to him. But just as he received the pass, Fredrik Carlsen, the Aalesunds left midfielder, was upon him.

Zachary looked around, searching for a teammate to give a pass. To his surprise, the opponents had already marked all the Rosenborg midfielders. Even Jonas Svensson, who'd just passed to him, had already been closed down by one of the Aalesunds forwards.

It seemed the opponents had decided to use the high-pressing strategy to pressure Rosenborg into losing possession of the ball. They were marking the Rosenborg players tightly deep in their own half.

However, Zachary didn't panic because of the pressure. Instead, he brought the ball to the ground with his back facing the Aalesunds left midfielder, who was almost upon him.

He then faked going to the right, forcing Fredrik Carlsen to buy the dummy and follow his body feint. But an instant later, he braked momentarily and reversed directions, going to the left with the ball glued to

his right foot. With that single move, he'd managed to lose the Aalesunds left midfielder, creating a yard of space for himself in the process.

However, he didn't let himself relax just yet. His soccer instincts were screaming at him that Fredrick Carlsen had retraced his steps and would be upon him once more in mere seconds. So, he didn't dilly-dally and flicked the ball further left, gaining an extra yard of space.

Adrenaline flooded his system as he assessed the situation across the field. His mind went into a higher gear to utilize the Zinedine-Pirlo Mental Juju and construct a mental map of all the players in his field of vision. All the while, he kept in motion, stepping further away from the opponents surrounding him.

In nothing but an instant, three linear passing routes connecting to a few of his teammates appeared in his visual field. They appeared as nearly intangible threads, extending from him towards his teammates. Furthermore, Zachary realized that they were not in his mind, like the mental maps he used to keep track of other players, but were—projected where his eyes had roamed.

Zachary was surprised for a moment since it was the first time he'd faced such a situation. The threads almost dazzled him to the point of blundering and committing the amateur mistake of leaving the ball behind. But luckily, he had already stepped a couple of yards away from Fredrick Carlsen, the Aalesunds midfielder. And thus, he took a couple of seconds to recollect himself and bring the ball under control before it was too late.

In the meantime, he also used those few seconds to observe the linear passing routes and decide where to distribute the ball as quickly as possible. He could tell that the three threads in his visual field were—linked to the zones around his teammates, who were unmarked or had yards of space to work with the ball.

Zachary smiled inwardly, realizing that the threads were the perfect guides revealing the best and most suitable passing options available to him on the pitch. But he still had to decide where to pass since the threads were only visual guides.

As a midfielder, he still had to use his game intelligence to determine which of the three passing routes projected in front of him would yield the best result. He could not simply base the decision on his teammate being open to receiving a pass. If he did that, he would end up distributing the ball to a teammate that was totally off form. That was unacceptable. What he had to consider, though, was the performance of that teammate during that game. Only then could he release long-range passes that could have a marked impact on the match situation.

## Chapter 128 - Zinedine-Pirlo Mental Juju In Action II

Zachary continued observing the threads and noted that one of them extended into an empty spot behind the Aalesunds defensive line. In nothing but an instant, he matched the thread with the mental map in his head, and everything clicked at that juncture. He managed to deduce that John Chibuike was the player most likely to make a run from the left flank into that position behind the Aalesunds defenders.

Zachary decided to follow the thread and pass towards the position right away since he knew well that John Chibuike, the left-forward who'd come on as a substitute, was on form. The forward had even been instrumental in the build-up of Rosenborg's first goal. There was no reason not to trust him to beat the defenders and connect with his pass.

So, he smiled, flicking the ball further left and shrugging away Fredrick Carlsen, who'd already caught up with him once more. Without any pause, he angled his body sideways and let loose a curling lofted pass towards the other side of the field.

The whole process of Zachary receiving the ball and releasing the pass happened over only a span of a few seconds. The Aalesunds defenders could not react quickly enough to the instant transition from midfield to attack by Rosenborg.

As soon as Zachary unleashed the pass, John Chibuike broke away with ease from the left flank after losing Hugues Wembangomo, the Aalesunds defender marking him. He cut in behind the Aalesunds defensive line from the wing, running his life depended on it.

In no time, he connected with Zachary's pass after beating Aalesunds' center backs by sheer pace. He headed the ball forward, directing it ahead of him—and soon was darting like a bullet train bound for Aalesunds box. The keeper came out of the goal to meet him, but John Chibuike circumvented him with a deft touch and slotted the ball into the empty net.

2:2.

Rosenborg had managed to score another goal in the 70th minute, equalizing the score against Aalesunds Fotballklubb. John Chibuike ran up to Zachary in the middle of the pitch and gave him a bear hug. "Nice pass and vision," he said.



"Thank you, that was some spectacular finishing there," Zachary replied, smiling. He was in a good mood after finally improving his mastery of the Zinedine-Pirlo Mental Juju. He had even used it to make an incredible assist during a game.

John Chibuike smiled and was about to reply but stopped the next instant. The rest of the Rosenborg players had finally caught up to them and started jumping on them to celebrate the goal.

In the meantime, the few Rosenborg fans in the Color Line Stadion started cheering and singing as if they'd already won the match. The visiting team was on fire.

"Okay, guys," Mikael Dorsin, the acting Rosenborg captain for that match, shouted, clapping his hands. "We have a match to win. Let's go back to our positions and do our best. We shall celebrate on the bus back home after the match." He first paused for a second, like he was preparing himself to do something momentous before shouting. "ROSENBORG! VICTORY!"

"ROSENBORG, \*clap\*clap\*, ROSENBORG..."

The rest of the players, including Zachary, shouted in a chorus before returning to their positions on the pitch. They were all eager to restart the match and try their best to win the game.

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In the visiting team's technical area, Coach Johansen's face was all smiles as he watched the game restart. Rosenborg's comeback seemed so surreal to him.

It had only been a few minutes since he made the two substitutions. But his team had already scored two goals and equalized the score with about 20 minutes left to the final whistle. Moreover, the players that had scored were the ones he'd just introduced into the game. Coach Johansen could feel contentment swelling within him as he followed the proceedings on the pitch.

"I think we can now safely conclude that Zachary is a genius at distributing the ball," Trond Henriksen, the assistant head coach, said, grinning. "I still can't believe he was able to spot the laxity in Aalesunds defense and connect with John to create that goal. He's surely going to be the man of the match if we win this game."

"Well, let's wait until the game ends then," Coach Johansen replied, his gaze still following the goings-on on the pitch. "In the meantime, tell Ole to warm up. We may need to replace Jonas before the game ends. He seems tired already."

"Alright," Coach Henriksen concurred, still grinning. "I will inform him right away."

"Thank you," Coach Johansen said, returning his attention to the pitch. He didn't want to miss any changes in the game situation.

Rosenborg had just regained possession after using high-pressing tactics to force Aalesunds' defenders to play long balls once again. Jonas Svensson, Rosenborg's defensive midfielder, jumped high deep in his own half and headed the ball back—towards Aalesunds side of the pitch.

Zachary reacted immediately and chased after the ball. He used his tall physique to out-jump Fredrik Carlsen, the Aalesunds number-8, and headed the ball onwards to Aalesunds' box.

Tarik Elyounoussi, the Rosenborg center forward for the day, tracked after the ball and managed to control it with his chest in the attacking third, even while under pressure. He brought it to the ground while holding off an Aalesunds center back solely with his incredible physique.

An additional Aalesunds player came to close him down soon after. However, Tarik made the proper decision and passed the ball back to the middle third, where Zachary was waiting. The African boy had just opened himself up to receive the ball from the striker. Coach Johansen nodded in approval due to the boy's magical sense of positioning on the field of play. He could always find gaps between the players while easily losing his markers.

In the middle third, Zachary controlled the ball with a deft first touch, looping the ball over Fredrik Carlsen, the Aalesunds midfielder, in the process. He worked the ball so naturally that Carlsen couldn't have expected the simple loop over his head and ended up disoriented for an instant.

Zachary quickly circumnavigated him while tracking after the ball. He then brought it to the ground with swift, seamless motions. However, before he could move a step further, Fredrik Carlsen managed to retrace his steps and pulled at his shirt. The Aalesunds midfielder gripped Zachary by the shirt, bringing

him to the ground like they were in a rugby match rather than a football game. It seemed Zachary's loop over his head had annoyed him quite a bit.

Chapter 129 - A Perfect Comeback I

\*FWEEEEEEEE\*

The referee blew the whistle for a foul and awarded Rosenborg a free-kick. But he didn't forget to show a yellow card to Fredrik Carlsen and give him a verbal warning.

"Zachary is on form in the midfield," Coach Henriksen commented. "He's cool-headed and the most active player on the pitch. He is trying to get on the ball as much as possible, and you can literally see the enthusiasm in his play. What a player! We should introduce him into the starting eleven permanently."

Coach Johansen nodded. "I thought he would take longer to mature. But it seems I was wrong. The boy is..." He stopped mid-sentence as all his focus had returned to the field of play.

At that instant, Zachary had just taken an unexpected lightning-fast free-kick, catching the Aalesunds players by surprise.

Tarik Elyounoussi, the Rosenborg center forward, got to the end of Zachary's cheeky free-kick in the final third. He controlled the ball well even before the opponents could organize themselves into a proper defensive shape. Without any dilly-dallying, he flicked the ball forward and tried to beat the keeper, who was off his line, with a shot from mid-range. However, the keeper managed to retrace his steps quickly before punching the ball out of play.

The referee pointed to the corner flag, awarding Rosenborg a corner kick. Aalesunds had just survived conceding the third goal in the 74th minute.

"F\*ck, why are we so f\*ckng unlucky," Coach Johansen couldn't help but mumble a curse, scratching his bald head in frustration. It was the first time in years since he had intoned that many profanities during a game. He was on tenterhooks since his job was still on the line if he failed to win the match.

"Should I tell Ole to get ready," Coach Henriksen, his assistant, asked.

"Not yet," Coach Johansen replied, his tone firm. "I have a feeling that the opponents may start targeting our players using fouls. It would be irresponsible not to leave a substitute on the bench as insurance against injury." He added, all the while keeping his focus on the match.

For the next ten minutes, Rosenborg continued dictating the tempo of the game. The Rosenborg players showcased great teamwork by keeping possession and producing pin-point passes from player to player. It was all Rosenborg for the time being as their football had gained rhythm and was finally flowing.

Zachary was especially active, playing long passes, seamless short passes, and quick one-twos—to grind down Aalesunds' defense. The opposition's players were finding it very difficult to intercept and win back possession from him. He played so well and even managed to unleash a long-range pass into the box in the 87th minute.

Tarik Elyounoussi, the Rosenborg forward, out-jumped the defense and connected with the pin-point cross to plant a header towards the goal from around the penalty spot. However, Sten Grytebust, Aalesunds' goalkeeper, was in top shape for that match. He managed to save yet another attempt at goal from Rosenborg.

Coach Johansen was getting more fidgety and impatient as the clock on the big screen approached the 90th minute. His players had played well for sure. However, the goddess of luck seemed not to be on their side. They had dominated Aalesunds in the later stages of the game—but couldn't seem to put the ball into the back of the net. Balls smashed off goalposts or deflections in the Aalesunds' box happened. But the score remained tied at 2:2 as the fourth official put up the board to indicate that there would be four minutes of added time.

"More pressure and more crosses into the box," Coach Johansen shouted at the top of his voice, trying to rouse his players into action. "Don't just pass the ball around in the middle third. Feed it forward. John, start making a lot more runs into their box and help out in attack." He yelled words at the pace of a machine gun.

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On hearing the coach yelling, Zachary opened himself up by losing his marker in the midfield and received a return pass from Jonas Svensson, the defensive midfielder. Without wasting any time, he kicked the ball towards the other side of the pitch—where the Rosenborg forwards were lurking.

Tarik Elyounoussi escaped his mark to meet the long-range pass in the final third. He chested the ball down before spinning around an Aalesunds center-back. Without any pause, he flicked the ball to his left and stepped away further from the center-back. He had gained a yard of space for himself and could easily attempt a shot at goal since he was just outside the arc of the 18-yard-box.

Zachary felt his heartbeat quicken as he watched the Rosenborg center forward raise a leg to make a shot that could potentially turn out to be the match-winner. However, to his dismay, Jason Morrison, the Aalesunds defensive midfielder, came sliding in and sent him tumbling to the ground. The challenge was so rough that Tarik even cried out loud in pain.

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The referee blew the whistle and awarded Rosenborg a free-kick. However, before he could do anything else, several Rosenborg players were upon him in an instant, shouting in his face and complaining about the brutal foul. The referee had to take some time to calm down the players before showing Jason Morrison a yellow card.

Zachary, on his part, didn't join the fray. Instead, he approached Mikael Dorsin, the acting Rosenborg captain for that match, while the other players were still complaining to the ref.

"I want to take that free-kick," Zachary said to the veteran defender as soon as he reached his side.

"You want to take the free-kick?" Mikael inquired, raising an eyebrow and glancing at Zachary with a pensive expression.

"Yes," Zachary replied, his tone firm. "I'm good at taking free-kicks. I have been practicing them every day for the past two years."

Mikael Dorsin creased a brow, first stealing a glance towards some of the other players like Tarik Elyounoussi and Borek Dockal. Those were all suitable candidates to take the set-piece. He then returned his gaze to Zachary. "Are you confident?" He asked.

"Yes, I'm very confident," Zachary replied solemnly.

"Oh, well," Mikael said, smiling. "This will be hard since you're a new player. There are already set-piece takers in the team. However, I'll still make it happen. You owe me a favor." His smile blossomed into a grin as he walked away towards the position of the free-kick.

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## Chapter 130 - A Perfect Comeback II

"They're giving the free-kick to Zachary!" Coach Henriksen exclaimed after seeing Mikael call Zachary over to the position of the free-kick. "What's wrong with Mikael today? It's already the 92nd minute, for God's sake. We need to convert this setpiece successfully." He frowned, seeming quite agitated.

"Just because he can pass the ball well doesn't mean he can take free-kicks. He probably won't be able to convert since free-kicks need to be practiced frequently over a long time. Zachary has been doing physicals! Where could he have gotten the time to practice setpieces?"

"Relax," Coach Johansen said, caressing his red beard. "If there is one player who can perform at such moments, it's Zachary. He managed to become the top scorer of the SIA Cup by relying mainly on his free-kicks. Let's hope he still has his touch from the academy."

"This..." Trond Henriksen was about to continue voicing his argument but sighed and stopped himself the next instant. Coach Johansen was his boss and had the final say on the tactics and game plan of Rosenborg. If he'd already made up his mind, then it was pretty useless to argue with him.

So, Coach Trond Henriksen calmed his mind and returned his attention to the field of play. He could only hope that Zachary was as good at free-kicks as he was at passing. Otherwise, Rosenborg would have squandered their best opportunity to win the game.

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"My decision as captain is final," Mikael said, picking the ball from Tarik Elyounoussi, the Rosenborg center forward, and handing it to Zachary once again. "You should all have realized that there isn't a player among us who could have matched his level during this game. He has already scored an incredible goal and made the assist that resulted in our equalizer. As for you, Tarik, you have failed to put the ball in the back of the net on multiple occasions. It seems like luck is not on your side today. So, why can't we bet on Zach, who seems to be on fire today?"

"Have it your way," Tarik grumbled, stepping away from the free-kick position. "But don't say I didn't warn you." He added, turning towards Zachary. "Goalkeepers at the professional stage are unlike those in the youth levels. If you don't use enough power, you'll be squandering our only chance to score. But, I do wish you all the best." He turned and walked into Aalesunds' box.

"Okay," Mikael said, smiling. "They all have no issues with you taking the free-kick. So, please do your best and hit the target at the very least. And may luck be on your side." He patted Zachary's back before also heading into the box.

Zachary smiled slightly when his teammates agreed to leave the free-kick to him. He'd been practicing the Bend-it like-Beckham Juju in the system simulator every single day for the past year. He had long mastered it to the one hundred percent level after repeating the practice thousands of times on the natural field. It was finally time to reap the benefits of his training.

He could feel his heart throbbing with excitement as he placed the ball on the green just outside the arc of the 18-yard box. He walked a few steps back and took a few deep breaths to calm himself.

In no time, his mind was as stable as the sea before a storm. Feeling that he was in the right state, he started observing the situation ahead of him in Aalesunds' box.

It was quite a crowded area. Six players in Aalesunds' orange jerseys had already lined up a few yards away from him, forming a wall to defend. The rest, from both teams, had also squeezed themselves into a line just inside the box to avoid being offside while trying to connect with the incoming free-kick. The situation in the area was chaotic, with tensions rising high as players jostled each other in anticipation of the free-kick. The referee had to show yellow cards to two of Aalesunds' players to dissuade them from continuing their rough handling of opponents in the box.

Zachary moved his attention to the goalkeeper after he finished analyzing the wall and the rest of the players in the box. He observed how the tall goalkeeper moved across his line, the way he organized his defense, and his standing posture. Zachary took in all the information that could be useful to him when taking the free-kick. He didn't want to blunder and mess up his first opportunity on a setpiece. It would be hard to come across another chance if he failed to make the free-kick count.

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The referee blew the whistle after arranging the players in the box. Zachary stopped observing the happenings in the box and took a few steps away from the ball.

Taking a deep breath, he started with a light jog towards the ball. He then took a final jump step and angled his body at almost 45 degrees to the ground before smashing the ball with the inside of his left boot. All the while, he kept his eyes focused on the ball.

Zachary managed to set loose a curling ball that darted around the wall of six Aalesunds players, seemingly heading for the outside of the left post. However, while mid-flight, the spin on the ball seemed to increase. And to everyone's surprise, it made a sharp curve—towards the inside of the left post before homing into the top right corner. The Aalesunds goalkeeper didn't react. He remained stationary and perplexed, wondering what had just happened.

2:3.

Rosenborg had managed to take the lead for the first time in the 93rd minute. Zachary could hardly contain his happiness. He ran to the corner flag to celebrate and even removed his shirt and threw it towards the few traveling Rosenborg fans.

He was like a mad man yelling at the top of his lungs. He even kicked the corner flag a few times due to the sheer bliss he was feeling.

However, he wasn't alone. The rest of his teammates came and jumped on him a moment later to celebrate the goal. They yelled like drunkards while slapping his back. Meanwhile, the two hundred or so Rosenborg fans in the stands cheered on their team, singing and clapping to celebrate Rosenborg's comeback. A few of them near the corner flag struggled to snatch Zachary's match jersey from one another. For a while, it was pure madness in the Color Line Stadion.