

## **Greatest 131**

### **Chapter 131 - First Yellow Card & Match Ending**

"You shouldn't have done that, my friend," Mikael Dorsin, the Rosenborg acting captain, said to Zachary as soon as they'd finished celebrating the goal.

"Done what?" Zachary queried, trying to understand what the veteran defender was getting at.

"Taken off your shirt," Mikael replied, pointing at Zachary's bare chest shaped like a tank. "You've earned yourself a pointless yellow card for that. Congratulations!" He added, shaking his head.

"Oh, crap," Zachary couldn't help but curse out loud on hearing Mikael's inference. He inclined his head and looked back towards the middle of the pitch. He noticed that the referee was dutifully waiting for him with a yellow card in hand. "It was just in the heat of the moment. I totally forgot about the damn FIFA law about not removing one's shirt for a goal celebration." He tried his best to explain to the acting captain.

The rest of the Rosenborg players around him whistled and laughed at that. They were still in a jolly mood after achieving the perfect comeback with only a minute to the final whistle.

"Oh, well, I understand as I would have done the same if I was in your shoes," Mikael said, grinning and patting his back. "I'm sure the coaches will too. However, you'll get a problem with the sporting director and the publicity guys. That was a match-winning jersey you just gave away without consulting the club. They'll be on your case since they would have preferred to use it in one of the promotional events."

"Oh!" Zachary frowned, stealing a glance at the stands, where one of the fans—an obviously teenage boy had just grabbed his shirt. He was already folding it like a prized possession and seemed ready to stow it away. "Should I request him to return it?" He asked the acting captain.

"Oh, no, you can't do that," Mikael said, his voice rising a little. "Once a jersey goes into the fans, then it's no longer ours—but theirs. That's an unwritten rule everyone follows. So, forget about it and pick another jersey from the bench. You better hurry coz the ref seems quite impatient."

"Okay, then," Zachary concurred before making his way out of his teammates and jogging towards Rosenborg's technical area. Without wasting any time, he picked up a new number-33 black Rosenborg jersey from a grinning Trond Henriksen, who said a few congratulatory words to him. In only a few seconds, he returned to his position in the middle third of the pitch and was ready for the match restart.

\*FWEEEEEEE\*

However, no sooner had he settled into his position than the referee blew his whistle and ran up to him. Zachary could only smile wryly as the stern-looking referee presented him with the first yellow card in his professional career. He couldn't believe he'd gotten his first booking from a goal celebration. Nonetheless, the card didn't dampen his mood in the slightest. He still felt drunk in happiness after scoring the goal.

The match restarted a few seconds after Zachary had received the yellow card. The Rosenberg players didn't allow Aalesunds any opportunity to dictate the game. They fought hard to get back possession immediately after the restart. When the ball returned to them, they slowed down the game's tempo by exchanging a combination of one-touch or two-touch passes in the defensive and middle thirds of the playing field. That way, they managed to keep the opposition at bay and held on to their one-goal lead.

When the referee blew the final whistle, every Rosenberg player on the pitch went mad with excitement. Some of them ran around the field like a bunch of kids who'd seen Santa on Christmas Eve. Others came up to Zachary and gave him bear hugs to celebrate the victory.

Zachary felt like he'd integrated further into his team after playing the match. He had grown to love the few Rosenberg fans that had traveled so far to give the team their support and felt at home among his teammates.

It was a feeling unlike before, where he had been only playing as hired labor without having the team at heart. At that moment, he saw how the fans were waving at him excitedly as he went around the stadium. Zachary realized that he'd started regarding the team as a new home.

The celebrations ended after few minutes. The Rosenberg players began leaving the pitch after shaking hands with the referees and opponents. Zachary trailed after a few of them, intending to return to the dressing room, take a shower as quickly as possible, and cool down his sore muscles. However, Coach Johansen intercepted him at the entrance to the tunnel.

"Nice game," the coach said, giving Zachary a bear hug. He seemed much happier than ever before. "That was some incredible performance. You're the man of the match for this game. How do you feel?"

"Terrific, of course," Zachary replied, grinning. "However, more than anything, I would like to quickly take a shower and then swallow down some water and energy bars."

Coach Johansen laughed at that. "That'll have to wait as duty calls. You're with me for the post-match interviews and press conference. Come along. The press guys are already waiting for us." He said, leading the way.

Zachary trailed after him, frowning. "Do I really have to go? Can't someone else, like the captain, for instance, go?" He asked after he'd fallen into step with the coach.

"Of course not," Coach Johansen replied without stopping. "The press will want to interview the new star of Rosenborg—the person that helped us stage a comeback after coming on as a substitute. That person is you and, there's no way around this. You can be absent for the press conference, but you have to take the post-match interview since you were the man of the match."

"Oh," Zachary said, continuing to match Coach Johansen's step.

Coach Johansen seemed to realize that he wasn't that excited about meeting the press and stopped for a moment. "Why do you seem down when you are going for your first interview?" He asked, inclining his head slightly to observe Zachary's face.

"It's not that I dread the press or anything like that," Zachary replied. "It's just that I'm not excited by a press meeting after a game. What's even the point? The fans and pundits already saw everything on the field of play! Why ask the player about it again right after the match? Moreover, I have seen a few journalists ask annoying questions during press conferences and interviews. I wouldn't want to be on the other end of those."

Coach Johansen laughed at that, patting his back. "Be honest. Are you sure that you're not just scared by the thought of being in front of a camera? That was a hell of a lot of words for a simple question!"

"Not at all," Zachary replied, making sure his voice remained firm. "Let's just go for the damn press conference." Of course, he wouldn't admit that he was a 'little' scared of standing in front of the camera. It was his first time getting called to a post-match interview in both his lives. So, he was at a loss of how to approach it.

"Okay, then," Coach Johansen said, smiling. "Don't worry about anything unnecessary. Just be yourself, and reply with brief answers. I'm sure you'll do okay." He then led the way to the area designated for the press.

## Chapter 132 - Post-Match Interview & Analysis

"That bicycle kick was something else," Paul Otterson said, shaking his head. "Zachary has already elevated his skills to a level we can't even imagine."

"The setpiece was even more refined than in his days back in the academy," Kendrick Otterson chipped in. "He must have put in a lot of effort to reach such a level."

"Nah," Kasongo said, shaking his head. "It's not just effort, but talent. No matter how much you train, if you lack the talent, you won't manage to make such an improvement in a year."

The other two sighed at that before casting their gazes back at the LCD-TV flat-screen atop one of the tables on one side of their kitchen at Moholt. The three of them had watched the match via the TV2 Sportskanalen—one of the leading Norwegian sports channels since they couldn't travel all the way to Ålesund.

When Zachary scored the first goal with a bicycle kick, they'd all jumped up in shock. Based on his academy days, they couldn't have imagined he would try such a stunt during an official game. On the other hand, they hadn't been surprised in the slightest by the second goal. They knew how good Zachary was at taking setpieces. He could even hit the goal post twenty out of twenty times from the edge of the 18-yard-box if he so desired on a good day. Finding the back of the net was merely a walk in the park for him.

"Guys," Kendrick said, shaking his head. "We should up our training intensity during the next few months. I feel like if we don't make it to the Rosenborg team this year, we'll never get a chance to play with him again."

"True," Paul said, smiling wryly. "But we still can't rush things. He develops much faster than us, that's for sure. But if we keep on training with the intent to catch up to him, I believe that we'll one day also play at the same level as him."

"Oh, my!" Kendrick exclaimed, gazing at his brother's face intently. "What is that in your eye?" He asked, seemingly agitated.

"Did you notice an abnormality in my eye," Paul probed, his voice rising a bit.

"Let me take a look," Kendrick replied, moving closer to his brother. "Is that a flicker of intelligence that I see in your eyes? That's truly weird!"

"Kendrick," Paul yelled, standing up and balling his fists. "I'll fight you today. I'm tired of your verbal jabs."

Kendrick laughed at that, not the least bit worried about his brother's threats.

"Guys," Kasongo chipped in, pointing at the screen. "Zachary is on TV. You have to watch this. He's the one representing the team for the post-match interview."

On hearing Kasongo's reminder, the two brothers stopped their squabbling—and returned their attention to the TV screen, where Zachary's solemn face had just appeared.

"Aya," Paul said, smiling. "He still looks like he wants to beat up someone. Why can't he smile for the camera?"

"Shhhhh!" The two others shushed him, more or less in unison.

"The press conference is starting. Let's listen to Zachary first." Kendrick said, increasing the volume on the television with the remote.

"Zachary, there was quite a lot going on in the second half," the reporter said, his voice coming to them through the TV speakers. "How do you feel after coming on as a substitute and helping your team stage the perfect comeback?"

"Well, I feel excited," Zachary said succinctly and solemnly.

"What went through your mind at the time when your coach asked you to head onto the pitch? Did you believe that you would score two goals and make an assist at that time?"

"Of course, I believed that my team, Rosenborg, could stage a comeback and win the game," Zachary replied, still wearing a stern expression. "But I wasn't even 50% sure that I would score. Football is a team sport. There are eleven players on the field. Anyone can get the goal and help the team win. It just depends on who gets the opportunity."

"So, you believed you could win at the time?"

"Yes, of course," Zachary replied, his voice firm. "I always head into every game with the sole belief that I'll emerge as the victor. When I entered the game, all that was on my mind was how to create opportunities and score. I had been watching the game from the sidelines and already knew we could do it. That was what drove me to give my all out there on the pitch."

"This is only your second game in Rosenborg colors. Didn't you feel any pressure when you came on at such a time when your team was two goals down?"

"Nope," Zachary replied. "Just excitement at finally getting the opportunity to perform."

"Let's talk about the goals," the reporter continued. "Your first goal was really out of this world."

"Oh, yes," Zachary replied, smiling for the first time on screen. "I just tried my luck with a bicycle-kick and luckily hit the target. I also couldn't believe it at the time. It was my first time trying out something like that."

"Then the second goal..."

"For the second goal, it was easy for me since it was in a very suitable position. I merely had to focus and hit the ball right to score."

"We saw quite a bit of contention amongst you and your teammates before you took the free-kick. What was going on?"

"Nothing much," Zachary said solemnly. "We were only discussing the best strategy for taking the free-kick amongst ourselves. And you should know that since it was the final minute, things can get intense as everyone on the team tries to offer their advice."

"Was that really it?"

"What else could it have been?" Zachary countered with a question, frowning slightly. But the expression made him seem all the more like he was about to punch someone.

"No worries, Zachary," the reporter said hurriedly. "I was only asking to determine why you were the person to take the free-kick out of all your teammates."

"That's simple," Zachary said, his expression softening. "I was given the responsibility to take the free-kick because I was the player with the best luck on the team at that moment."

"Luck?"

"Yes, my luck was the highest at the time," Zachary said solemnly.

"Moving on," the reporter intoned, seemingly defeated by Zachary's response. "Are you really eighteen, as they say? We saw you bullying the Aalesunds midfielders out there, sometimes by simply relying on your physique. You didn't look like an eighteen-year-old out there."

"Well, how old do you think I am, then?" Zachary countered with a question, smiling slightly. He appeared to have already gotten used to standing in front of the camera.

"At first glance, I would say you're at least twenty-five," the reporter said jokingly. "That is especially so since we got to see your well-defined muscles when you were celebrating your second goal."

"Well, I eat well. There's nothing much to it."

The reporter laughed at that before saying: "Zachary, it was a pleasure having you here. Congratulations on becoming the man of the match. I wish you a successful career. May we see you here again, soon."

"Thank you," Zachary replied, and his image disappeared from the screen—replaced by the three live television pundits in the studio.

"There you have it," Samantha Fladset, the female presenter, said, using the Norwegian language. "That was Zachary Bemba having an interview with Olav Brusveen—our reporter at the Color Line Stadion in Ålesund—where the match between Aalesunds Fotballklubb and Rosenborg Ballklub has just ended."

"Zachary is a player that likes to win," she continued, the corners of her lips curling into a smile. "And, of course, he's a player who eats well. Those were his words."

The other two in the studio laughed at that.

"Harald," Samantha said, turning towards a male in a suit on her left. "You were the on-pitch pundit for Rosenborg's game against Strindheim during mid-week. What do you make of him?"

"The boy is talented, for sure," Harald Brattbakk, the Rosenborg legend, said, smiling. "Mid-week, he produced that incredible assist and scored that shocker from outside the 18-yard box. We all said; oh well, he was just against a second division team. But this time around, he was against Aalesunds, the team currently on top of the table. Yet, he still managed to dominate the midfield and even score two incredible goals. What a player!"

"You're absolutely right, Harald," André Rekdal, the other pundit for the day, chipped in. "I have just taken a look at his game stats just now. He played for 29 minutes. In those 29 minutes, he made 72 touches on the ball and had a 97% pass completion rate. He produced five key passes, which all resulted in clear shots on goal. He also won quite the number of ground and aerial duels in midfield, helping his team dictate the tempo. And of course, we can't forget his incredible assist and the two goals. What a player, indeed!"



"Do you think that the two goals will make it into Tippeligaen's monthly best list?" The presenter inquired.

"Absolutely," André Rekdal replied right away, his tone confident. "Especially the first goal. That was a shocker that we haven't seen here in the Tippeligaen in forever. Have we?" He looked at Harald inquiringly.

"Not in any of the matches that I can remember," Harald replied, shaking his head.

"Well, I thought so too," André said, smiling. "That bicycle-kick was a shocker that should be among the top goals of the season. The second goal was also out of this world. The way Zachary applied that spin on the ball to curl it over the defense was simply genius. I really don't know where Rosenborg has been hiding this boy. Harald, can you enlighten us?"

"Funny question." Harald laughed. "I'm not on Rosenborg's management. They're simply my former employers."

"To answer that question," Samantha Fladset, the presenter, cut in. "Zachary has been in the NF Academy for the past two years. He played in some of the smaller international competitions like the Riga and SIA Cups and performed quite well."

"Of course, we can't forget his performance in the Norway Youth Cup," Harald chipped in, smiling. "That was the first time I saw him on the pitch. He was the MVP of that tournament."

"There's too much that we don't know about Zachary." Samantha chuckled. "But Coach Johansen says that he's one of Rosenborg's secret weapons for this season."

"But not so secret, any longer," André said, grinning. "The other teams are now aware of the threat he poses on the pitch. I'm guessing that plenty of them are already devising means on how to handle him during the next few games."

"Yes, exactly," Harald concurred. "In the past two games, I felt like he was allowed free reign in the middle of the field since very few were aware of his skill level. But he should be facing some hard times when the coaches start targeting him."

"Well, let's wait and see how he performs against Tromsø mid-week," Samantha chipped in. "For now, let's check out the table standings after the first two matches of the Tippeligaen's Match-Day-7. Rosenborg has moved into third place with 13 points after their victory today. Ahead of them is Strømsgodset Toppfotball in the second position, also with 13 points, but they play tomorrow. And in the first place is still Aalesunds Fotballklubb also at 13 points. This quite the table! Three teams tied at 13 points."

"The Tippeligaen is turning out to be very competitive this season," André, the pundit, chipped in. "It's no longer the old days of the Harald's where Rosenborg used to dominate everything."

"True, that," Harald replied, smiling. "But with the new secret weapon, who knows? Maybe, this is another golden age of Rosenborg..." His voice died away mid-sentence as Kendrick had reduced the volume of the screen.

The three boys then sat in silence, mulling over the info they had just gotten. They were too shocked by Zachary's performance after hearing his detailed match stats.

"Tomorrow, I am waking up at five to train," Kendrick said after a moment.

"Me too," Both Kasongo and Paul Otterson replied, more or less in unison. They had set their priorities straight after watching Zachary's performance on the professional stage.

## Chapter 133 - A Day-off I

Zachary woke up quite late the morning after the Aalesunds game. He was suffering from post-match fatigue and wished he could just lay in bed all day without a care for anything in the world.

He stretched out an arm and picked his phone from the bedside table. When he switched it on to check the time, he was startled to find out that it was already past eleven in the morning. For the first time since arriving in Norway, he'd broken his routine and woken up late due to sheer exhaustion.

The previous night, they'd left the Color Line Stadion in Ålesund when it was already 9:00 PM since the match against Aalesunds Fotballklubb had ended a few minutes past 8:00 PM. The journey back by bus

had taken more than five hours. They'd only managed to arrive at Lerkendal close to three in the morning. Although Zachary had played less than thirty minutes in the game, he still felt dog tired because of the long journey and going to bed late. He didn't feel like doing anything that day.

He felt like he had a hangover and yearned to dislocate his spirit from his body—just to let his soul go wherever souls go to be Zen. Then he wouldn't have to feel the brunt of the exhaustion he'd accumulated from the previous day's exertions.

However, he knew he couldn't give in to the temptation of closing his eyes and entering dreamland once again. He understood he had to go through his post-match recovery routine immediately—so that he could ready himself for the next Rosenborg fixture on Wednesday.

So, he forced himself to get out of bed and begrudgingly started doing the needful. He understood he had to put in a lot of sweat, effort, and determination if he needed to improve his skills quickly. He couldn't just depend on the system.

So, he went through his post-match yoga routine to stretch his sore muscles, took a cold bath, and then destroyed a sumptuous breakfast in a matter of minutes. A little while later, he washed up and settled in a sofa to relax. He'd recovered to some extent and regained some energy to face the day. But he was at a loss of what to do for the next few hours.

Coach Johansen had given all the players who'd participated in the match a compulsory free day that Sunday. He had insisted that every player take the day off to rest and only return to training the following Monday. So, Zachary didn't need to go to either the gym or the training ground that day. But since he was so used to practicing all the time, he couldn't decide—how to use the compulsory free time.

Bzzt Bzzzt! Bzzt Bzzzt!

His phone vibrated on the nearby table as he was still thinking about his dilemma. He picked it up and glanced at the screen. It was Marta Romano, his former classmate, calling. He let it continue vibrating, hoping that the caller at the other end would get the impression he wasn't available at the moment. He didn't want to deal with Marta, especially with the fatigue he was battling that morning. Nevertheless, Marta didn't stop calling until he was—forced to pick up on the third time around.

"Hello, Marta," Zachary spoke into the phone, leaning back into the sofa and crossing his legs on the table. "Long time, no see," he added.

"Hello, Zachary," Marta's voice, colored by an Italian accent, said from the other side of the line. "Yes, it has been quite a few months since we linked up. So, can we meet up, maybe at City Syd? And don't try to turn me down by claiming that you have training. I know for sure that players are given days off after playing away games."

Zachary could only smile wryly. "Okay then, let's link up at City Syd for a coffee," he said. If he had to be honest with himself, he would admit he wanted to see Marta once again.

They'd been acquaintances ever since they'd joined the Trøndelag International School for their upper secondary education. She'd even tutored him whenever he found hardships in some subjects. However, things started going south and awkward between them when Marta's disposition, especially when around him, took an unexpected turn.

The previous year, just after the Riga Cup, Marta had been so forward with him, trying to express her feelings. Zachary, of course, was tempted by her advances since it somehow felt good to be chased after by a beautiful and charming girl who was also easygoing.

But every time Zachary was about to take that last step, there was always a voice in his head, dissuading him from complicating his relationship with the girl. It was similar to the inner voice he'd always heard—back when he was about to do something wrong during his younger years.

At one time, he'd almost stealthily stolen a spoon of sugar from his grandma's stash, but the voice had appeared and discouraged him from going ahead with the deed. He'd experienced a similar situation when he thought about becoming intimate with Marta.

Moreover, he wasn't so head over heels for her that he would ignore his base instincts. So, he'd created some distance between them and tried to maintain their just-friends connection. But Marta hadn't been dissuaded by Zachary's offhandish behavior at the time. Instead, she'd upped her attempts at flirting with him. Zachary had felt a bit uncomfortable at the time—that he outright started avoiding her. But he still missed her company.

"Zach, are you still there?" Marta queried, her voice rising slightly.

"Yes, of course," Zachary replied, recollecting his thoughts. For a moment there, he'd lost himself in the not-so-good old days. "What time should we link up?" He inquired after a moment.

"Let's say 2:30 PM," Marta replied. "Is that okay on your side?"

"That's okay with me."

"Then great," Marta said excitedly. "See you in thirty minutes, then."

Thirty minutes later, the two of them sat opposite each other in one of the coffee shops at City Syd. They sat in silence for a while, with neither trying to break the ice.

"Would you like to have anything," a waitress came up to their table and asked.

"A coffee would be nice," Zachary replied, inclining his head and flashing a smile at the waitress. He was thankful for her timely interruption to break the awkward moment.

"Anything to eat?" The waitress probed, smiling back.

"I'll have a sour cream coffee cake. Also, add on a few bacon strips. Thank you."

"And what will you be having, miss?" She asked, turning towards Marta on the other side of the table.

"The same as he's having," Marta replied, flashing her a brief smile.

"Okay, your order will be coming up in a minute or two," the waiter replied before walking away.

As soon as the waiter departed, the same awkward silence from before descended on their table once again. The silent atmosphere around their table at that moment was too nerve-wracking.

"How have you been?" Zachary said, wishing to put a halt to the awkward moment.

"Same as always," Marta replied, a smile that seemed forced rather than natural, outlining her face. But her brown eyes that matched well with her dark hair made her look more beautiful, nevertheless. "And you?" She queried after a moment.

"I have been doing okay," Zachary replied, wishing more than anything to make the atmosphere between them less awkward. "I'm now playing for the senior team. I guess I'm partway to fulfilling some of my dreams."

Marta smiled more naturally that time around. "I watched your game on TV with my sister. That was some incredible performance you put up—out there against Aalesunds. Your two goals were out of this world. They're even becoming a sensation on social media." She sighed and then smiled.

"Oh," Zachary said, first at a loss of what to say in reply to all the compliments. But he seemed to remember his manners a moment later and added: "Thank you. I only tried doing my best in the game, and things just worked out."

When they started talking about football, the conversation started flowing more naturally. For a while, the two discussed Rosenborg, the Tippeligaen, the Norwegian Football Cup, and even the upcoming Europa League. A little bit afterward, the waitress brought their orders, and they ate while continuing their discussion. That way, half an hour passed by in a flash, and they seemed to have covered everything that they could about the current news in football. The awkward atmosphere returned to the table once again.

"By the way," Marta said, breaking the awkwardness that time around. "I wanted to meet you to tell you something." She had an air of melancholy about her like she was about to deliver some bad news.

"Oh." Zachary creased a brow, wondering whatever it was Marta wanted to discuss. He couldn't help but wonder whether she was about to suggest that they try going out first and then cultivate their feelings together at a later stage.

"It's not what you're thinking," Marta hurriedly said, seeming to have read his mind. "I only wanted to meet you to say my goodbyes. I'm leaving Trondheim soon. I'll be leaving tomorrow, for good." She added, sighing.

#### Chapter 134 - A Day-off II

"You're leaving Trondheim!" Zachary exclaimed, his voice coming out slightly higher than intended. "What happened? What about your music school? Didn't you say you still had a few more years to complete your studies there? Don't tell me it was me—" He stopped mid-sentence, inclining his head slightly to hold Marta's gaze for a brief moment.

"Oh, come on, Zach!" Marta said, the corners of her lips curling into a smile. "You're not such an Adonis to make me lose myself and escape from Trondheim because of you. At least not for the moment." She added, her tone filled with honesty.

"Oh," Zachary said, raising a brow.

"You seem to doubt me," she said, pouting. "I only wished for us to get together since we were both single and seemed to get along well at the time." She paused for a moment as if she was trying to recall past fond memories. "But when you showed no interest in me, I stopped bothering you," she continued. "Isn't that so, Zach?" She held Zachary's gaze.

"That's true," Zachary agreed, nodding. For the past few months, he didn't get any odd messages from Marta. So, maybe, what she'd said was true. "But why are you leaving Trondheim, then?"

"That's actually thanks to you," Marta replied, smiling.

Zachary frowned, wondering what she was getting at. She was moving in circles, saying that it was not his fault she was moving away—then a while later, she said the opposite. Zachary was in a state of emotional disarray.

"Don't get the wrong idea," Marta hurriedly said. "I'm just leaving to chase my true dreams in Italy once again. That's because I saw how you were performing and playing in Rosenborg. Do you remember when I told you that I used to play football?"

"Yes." Zachary nodded. He recalled that at one time, Marta had mentioned something about being a fan of AC Milan and playing football when she was younger. But she had lost the love of the sport due to some setbacks.

"Well, I've finally resolved to head back to Milan and restart my career as a youth league football player," Marta said, smiling slightly.

"Oh," Zachary said, feeling a burden off his heart. If she was heading back home to chase her dreams, that could be a good thing. "What about your music?" He asked after a moment of deliberation.

"Music was never my dream," Marta replied, her tone firm. "That was my sister's dream. I only followed her here because of the circumstances at the time. Sorry, I don't want to talk about those now. They're a bit too personal. My childhood dream, though, was always to turn professional and maybe represent Italy one day." Her voice was brimming with hope and confidence.

"Then go for it," Zachary said, smiling. "But are you going to be able to catch up with the rest? You know that football is the sort of sport where you have to train daily to maintain and improve your skill."

Marta smiled. "I'm not sure about that," she said, "but I'll try anyway. When I saw you scoring those two goals, I couldn't resist my passion for the sport any longer. So, I'll give it my all and try to succeed."

"Okay, then," Zachary replied. "I wish you luck and will miss you."

"Oh, that warms my heart," Marta said jokingly. "But will you really miss me? Milan is just five hours away from here. You can come and visit at any time."

"We'll see," Zachary said perfunctorily. "Is your sister going with you?"

"No, she will remain here in Trondheim chasing her dream," Marta replied, shaking her head. "I tried to get her to leave with me back to Milan, but she refused. She has long fallen in love with the lifestyle here."



The two of them continued making small talk for a few more minutes until it was finally time to say their goodbyes. Zachary wished her good luck and a safe journey while hugging her. Marta, on the other hand, requested him to keep in touch while returning the hug. After that, they parted their ways on a good note.

As Marta Romano was leaving City Syd, she received a call from Grant Anderson. She frowned, cursing inwardly as that was the umpteenth time he was calling her that day. But she decided to halt first on the sidewalk, pick up the call, and clear up the issues with him for once. Otherwise, her troubles would fall onto her sister when she left Trondheim the following day.

"Hello, Grant," she spoke into the phone after accepting the call. "What else do you want? Haven't we already cleared everything?" She asked, making sure to keep her voice calm and steady.

"Oh, my little Marta," the voice at the other end said, taking on a cryptic tone. "I already said that no one escapes from me. It doesn't matter whether you already repaid your debt. What you did wrong was that you didn't fulfill one of your promises to me? And I'll have you meet the end of your promise in any way I can. That includes using your sister." He added, seemingly amused.

Marta did not seem surprised by the caller's threat but instead smiled. "I knew you might say that. So, I left you a present in your mailbox. When you see it, I'm sure you'll have a change of heart."

"What present?"

"You'll know when you open your mailbox," Marta replied in a cheerful voice, ending the call afterward. She then hummed an Italian song as she recommenced her trekking towards the bus stop.

Bzzt Bzzzt! Bzzt Bzzzt!

Her phone vibrated once more when she was about to make it to the bus stop. She picked up the call without looking at the screen because she already knew who was calling. "Yes, Grant," she said.

"Damn, bitch," the voice at the other end yelled to the point that she'd to move the phone away from her ear. "Where did you get that ledger? We're not playing games here. Where's the original?"

"The original is somewhere away very safe," Marta replied, halting mid-step and smiling. "If you keep out of my way, it'll remain that way. But if you mess with me again, I'll let all that's in the ledger blow up in your face."

"I could just kidnap your sister and easily get the ledger from you."

"But if you do that, you'll attract the attention of your old man and the others," Marta said, struggling to keep her voice firm and steady. "I believe I don't need to tell you what will follow if that happens."

"Believe me when I say that I'll get you back for this one day," the voice at the other end said. "Mark my words."

"But until then, you can do nothing to me," Marta intoned, "Goodbye," she ended the call, taking a deep breath to calm herself down. Talking to grant had robbed her of all her energy.

"Let's hope things remain calm until I can get a better solution," she mumbled, wiping her forehead with the back of her hand. She continued to the bus stop. She had to prepare to leave Trondheim with the first flight the following day.

## Chapter 135 - First Time On Starting Line-Up

After Zachary's day off on Sunday, he spent the next couple of days training like a maniac. As a supplement to the team training sessions, he spent the rest of his time either in the gym or going through additional training drills alone at Lerkendal. On Monday evening, he even stayed on the training ground all the way until eight in the night, steadily working on his set-piece-taking skills.

Zachary understood that if he honed his set-piece techniques to the highest level possible, he would surely obtain a starting position on the starting line-up. There was no doubt in his mind about that. As long as he sustained a high conversion rate with free-kicks, there was no way the coach would leave him on the bench since a good set-piece taker gave the team a surefire option to net goals. So, Zachary spent a lot of time practicing either on the pitch or in the G.O.A.T Skills Simulator.

Time flashed by quickly, and it was soon Tuesday evening. It was time for Coach Johansen to name the match squad once more.

"Good evening, everyone," Coach Johansen said after everyone had taken their seats in the Rosenborg tactics room.

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

Coach Johansen nodded. "I believe that we're ready to face Tromsø Idrettslag tomorrow at 7:00 PM here at Lerkendal. We've already refined the tactics and game plan in the training sessions during the last two days. Haven't we?" He swept his gaze across the room.

"Yes, coach."

"That's good," the coach said, smiling slightly. "We were able to perform well in the second half of the game against Aalesunds on the weekend. I need us to build on that momentum and continue winning. I need focus and creativity on the pitch. Remember that we're a strong team. We don't need to fear the opponents. They are the ones who should be scared of us. So, play with confidence, play with zeal, and above all, play as a team. That's the only way to keep on winning and return to the top of the table. Are we together?"

"Yes, coach."

Coach Johansen glanced at his watch before continuing. "It's already late. We already spent the whole evening on those corner kick drills, and I'm sure you must all be very tired. So, I won't take up much of your time this evening." He smiled, stepping towards the screen where a 4-3-3 formation had just appeared.

"We'll still play with the 4-3-3 formation during tomorrow's game," the coach said, pointing towards the screen. "However, I've made a few changes to the formation to help us accommodate new promising players in our first team. Instead of playing with one holding midfielder here—" He paused for a moment pointing at the position on the screen. "We shall play with two holding midfielders. That means that the two holding midfielders will remain defense-oriented until I say otherwise. The rest will play as planned with no changes to what I require from them on the pitch..."

Zachary listened intently as the coach continued elaborating on the main points of the formation and game plan for the next few minutes. Although he'd promised he wouldn't take long, he still went over even the simplest of points, trying to explain them to the players. It seemed he hoped to implant the information into his players' minds by sheer force of will.

Nonetheless, none of the players, including Zachary, raised a single complaint. They were all on their best behavior and listened with rapt attention. They all wanted to be in the good books of the coach. That was especially so since the coach was about to announce the squad for the next fixture. Not a single one of them would risk annoying him with some laxity in attention during the meeting. With that kind of atmosphere in the tactics room, the minutes flashed by—and a while later, Coach Johansen got to the point of naming the match squad for the game against Tromsø Idrettslag.

"Okay, I will now begin naming the starting eleven in our 4-3-3 formation," the coach intoned, smiling slightly.

"Lund Hansen will be our keeper, as always. The four defenders will be Mikael Dorsin, Tore Reginiussen, Stefan Strandberg, and Cristian Gamboa. Our two defensive midfielders that will act as the double-pivot during the game will be Mike Jensen and Jonas Svensson. Zachary Bemba will play as our attacking midfielder behind the forwards to complete our triangular midfield." The coach paused, casting a glance at Zachary, who was seated at the very back. "Are we together, Zachary? Is everything clear?" He asked.

"Yes, coach," Zachary replied solemnly. "Everything is clear." Although he was wearing a stern face, it was just a facade to match the atmosphere in the room. But he was bursting with joy on the inside as it was his first time making Rosenborg's starting eleven. His spirits were already bounding higher when he thought about how he would be starting the match against Tromsø Idrettslag the following day. Nevertheless, he forced himself to calm down and continue listening to the coach.

"And finally," Coach Johansen continued, "we have Tobias Mikkelsen, Tarik Elyounoussi, and Nicki Nielsen as the three forwards. Nicki will play as the center-forward through the middle, while Tarik and Tobias will be on the left and right flanks, respectively. That's it for the starting eleven."

"On the bench," the coach continued without a pause. "We have Daniel Rønlund, Brede Moe, Verner Rønning, Ole Selnaes, Mix Diskerud, Borek Dockal, and John Chibuike. That's it for the squad."

"Any questions?" Coach Johansen asked after announcing the squad.

All the players, including Zachary, remained silent. The coach had gone over the game plan several times over the past three days. Everyone was already tired of hearing it. And, of course, they wouldn't dare question the coach about the line-up since that was a forbidden thing to do in a football team. The coaches had the final say about the line-ups. No one else, not even the club chairman, had the right to question the coach about them. The players couldn't do so either.

Okay, that's great then," Coach Johansen said, smiling. "Since there are no questions, let's call it a day. Those that didn't make the squad, please work harder. As I promised, I'll surely give you an opportunity if you keep true to your football."

"For players on the squad, the game is starting tomorrow at 7:00 PM. So, we'll meet at two in the afternoon to begin preparations. Don't be late. Have a good night."

As soon as Coach Johansen concluded his address, the players began making their way out of the tactics room. Zachary exchanged a few words with some of his teammates, like Mikael Dorsin. They congratulated him on making the squad before they exited the tactics room.

A while later, Zachary left Lerkendal and reached his apartment thirty minutes later. No sooner had he stepped into his living room than a system notification sounded in his mind.

"DING"

"The user has completed a hidden system mission: Join the Rosenborg Starting Eleven before Match Day 9 of the Tippeligaen," the AI's voice sounded in his mind.

"The user has earned 500 Juju-points for completing the mission."

"Please continue working hard to unlock more hidden missions."

Chapter 136 - Endorsement Deal Offers I

Wednesday, May 8, 2013.

Zachary glanced at his watch and realized it was already 8:30 AM. So, he made quick work of his breakfast, brushed his teeth, and exited his apartment with all the haste he could muster. The previous night, Emily, his agent, had informed him over the phone that two companies were interested in entering endorsement contracts with him. He was on his way to meet with her and discuss the way forward.

However, he'd just realized he was almost running late since he had first taken the time to go through a stretching routine.

Despite his excitement over the prospect of winning an endorsement deal, his football career was still his priority. He needed to keep his muscles warm and ready for the game later that evening. He couldn't break his pre-match conditioning routine just for an appointment. So, he had only managed to leave his apartment with only thirty minutes left to the scheduled time of the meeting.

He descended the stairs of his apartment like the wind—and was out into the city's fresh air in a matter of seconds. He noticed that the just-risen sun, shining softly on the streets, had already brought with it a flurry of early-morning activity to Trondheim. Traffic was busy that morning as if the roads were a playset that came with many automobiles and pedestrians.

Zachary didn't continue to the bus stop, as usual. Instead, he stopped by the roadside, waiting for his taxi to arrive.

He had already called the taxi service before leaving his apartment. He couldn't wait for the bus since he was already running late.

He didn't have to wait long since the taxi companies in Norway were very efficient. Only two minutes later, a black Audi pulled up beside him. Without any delay, he boarded and paid the fee. A while later, he was on his way to Trondheim Square—to meet up with Emily.

The taxi driver used several shortcuts, evading the streets with bustling traffic that morning. Zachary managed to reach his destination in only twenty-five minutes. He strengthened his resolve to buy a car as soon as possible after experiencing the convenience of a private vehicle in Trondheim firsthand. He had long started feeling that using the bus was troublesome due to his busy schedule.

When he got out of the taxi, he hurried on, pushing past the other pedestrians on the streets. He was—headed to the cafe, where he was supposed to meet Emily. After rounding a few corners, he ascended some stairs and reached his destination on the second floor of a mall near Trondheim Square.

"You're late" was the first sentence that came out of Emily's mouth as Zachary settled into a seat opposite her.

"But, only a few minutes," Zachary replied, smiling sheepishly. "I forgot about the passage of time when I was going through my stretching routine. It usually happens to me when I'm focused on exercise. Sorry about that."

"No worries," Emily replied, her expression softening a little. "But it wouldn't look good if we were meeting a company representative and you arrived late. Do take note of that in the future." Her intelligent blue eyes searched Zachary's face, waiting for a response.

"I'll do that," Zachary replied solemnly, leaning back into his seat. He felt his emotions calm down as the homey ambiance of the cafe drew his soul into its cocoon for a few blessed moments. He smiled at Emily and said: "Good morning! How was your journey, by the way?"

"I'm good, and the journey was as fine as it could be," Emily said in a flat voice.

"About the endorsement offers: you said there are two companies that would like to enter endorsement deals with me!" He said, getting straight to the point of the meeting. He wanted to be done with the endorsement deal business as fast as possible—so that he could head to Lerkendal to continue his pre-match conditioning.

"Yes, that's right," Emily replied, sipping on her coffee. "But first, would you like to order anything. I'll be buying today."

"Just orange juice will do," Zachary replied, grinning. "I already had a heavy breakfast back at my apartment. I don't want to perform poorly this evening just because I failed to regulate my food consumption. Imagine missing a match due to heartburn or a bloated stomach. That would be embarrassing."

Emily chuckled at that. "Okay, then," she said, beaming. "Let's get you some orange juice then." She then called over a waitress and made the order before focusing on Zachary once again.

"We have two offers," she began, her voice taking on a formal tone. "It seems your performance last weekend caused quite a stir in Norway. It seems you managed to raise your fan base, especially here in Trondheim. That should be the reason some companies here are intent on getting your signature and betting on your future. But don't expect a lot since you've only just started playing."

Zachary nodded, indicating that he'd gotten the point as he waited for his agent to continue.

"One of the offers is from Red Bull, the company with the highest market share of any energy drink in the world today," Emily continued. "They're offering 300,000 NOK per year, for five years, to get your signature as one of the athletes on their endorsement marketing roster for Norway. The money seems small, but they promised that they would improve the terms if you continue performing well in the Tippeligaen."

"Three hundred thousand," Zachary mumbled, frowning on hearing Red Bull's offer. "That's 25,000 per month. Isn't that offer insincere?"

He knew well that some of the biggest sporting stars earned the majority of their money without having to kick, bounce or throw a ball at all. That all came down to one magical word. Endorsements. Athletes could even receive tens of millions of dollars per year from endorsement contracts alone. Even the not-so-popular athletes had deals worth tens of thousands of dollars from the popular brands in their respective countries. Yet, Red Bull, the world's largest energy drink supplier, had made him an offer in Kroners, not even dollars or Euros. Zachary knew that they were not committed to securing his signature.

"Yes, the annual pay they're offering is quite dismal," Emily replied, nodding. "But there are good points to the deal. For instance, if you manage to become the top scorer in the Tippeligaen within the years under contract, the money you receive will multiply sixfold. And, in case you manage to become the best player in the Tippeligaen, the money would be multiplied twelve times. There are even more provisions for further achievements. But, I don't think those are important at the moment."

"So, it's a good deal, then?" Zachary queried, inclining his head to lock eyes with Emily.



"According to me, it's a good deal in the long run. What Red Bull is betting on is your potential to become popular. They hope to ride that wave to increase their energy drink sales here in Norway. If you work well with them, they could turn into long-term partners."

"Would you like to read through their offer now?" Emily inquired after seeing Zachary's hesitation.

"Not now," Zachary said, shaking his head. "I don't want to add too much into my head right now. I have to play a game later today. What about the other offer?"

"Oh," Emily said, sighing. "The other offer is kind of weird. It is from a betting company called BetNet International. They serve most of Europe—including England, Italy, Cyprus, and Austria. They are now expanding into Scandinavia." She paused for a few moments as the waitress had finally brought Zachary's juice.

Zachary mouthed a thank you to the waitress as he picked up his juice. He then sipped on it as he waited eagerly for his agent to continue.

"They are offering 6 million Kroner per year as the start-up salary for you to become their ambassador," she said after the waitress was out of earshot. "I don't know the reason, but my lawyer instincts are warning me not to consider the offer."

"Oh," Zachary said, raising a brow. "Why is that? They seem to be more serious than the Red Bull people."

#### Chapter 137 - Endorsement Deal Offers II

Emily shook her head, smiling wryly. "You've just played two games," she said. "Even though you've performed well, that shouldn't be enough for a company to go on and give you such a deal. It's kind of fishy when you think about it. So, I'm proposing we reject them right away."

"Moreover, I only agreed to meet with them on impulse after finding out that their representative was a Rosenberg executive. What was funny, though, was that he had a similar second name to mine."

"Who was it?" Zachary interjected, surprised by the fact that one of the club's executives was a representative of a betting company.

"It's someone called Johan Arne Anderson. The name further enticed me to meet with him—only to find out that he was a representative of BetNet international—and wanted to offer you a deal to become their ambassador."

"Johan Arne Anderson," Zachary mumbled, mulling over the name. "I've never heard of such a person being part of the club's management. But then, I don't know everyone at the club. He may be one of those working behind the scenes."

"He's should be," Emily intoned. "One of my colleagues has already confirmed this. There's no question about it. What I have doubts about is the company behind him. We wouldn't want you associating with any brands that may put your name through the mud at some point in the future. We're better off remaining broke for the moment than taking the risk."

"Well, that's true," Zachary said, smiling. "I concur with your proposition to avoid the betting company for now. I know that they pay well, but since your instincts are telling you to reject them—let's do it that way."

"I'm glad that you agree," Emily said, her eyes crinkling at the corners. "If my work ethics were not against keeping offers from you, I wouldn't have even mentioned it. I had even prepared a long speech to convince you to drop the deal. But, it seems I was worried over nothing."

Zachary beamed back at her. "So, what's the way forward?" He asked. "Should we take the deal from Red Bull? To be honest: I don't find it lucrative enough for me."

"I think so too," Emily replied, her voice slowly growing bubbly. "What we can do is wait for a while until you play more matches. Do you have the confidence to keep putting up exceptional performances for the next few games?"

Zachary sighed, shaking his head. "That I can't tell or promise. Football is the sort of game where you may find yourself underperforming in some matches. You can't maintain consistency throughout every fixture of the season. But I'm sure that as long as I keep getting set-piece opportunities, I can continue scoring even if I don't manage to perform well during matches."

"Then that's all that matters," Emily said with a sparkle in her blue eyes. "As long as you keep scoring for Rosenborg, your popularity will rise until those brands can't ignore you any longer. In the meantime, I'll

initiate talks with Red Bull and start the initial phases of negotiations as we wait for you to grow your reputation here in Norway."

"That's a good plan." Zachary nodded. "Waiting is the best option, I think." He was already earning 400,000 NOK before bonuses each month. There was no need for him to rush into an endorsement deal that wasn't attractive enough.

"Before I forget," Zachary continued, inclining his head to lock eyes with Emily. "Is there any chance that you are good with cars?"

Emily sat bolt upright on hearing Zachary's question. "Did you finally decide to buy a vehicle for yourself?"

"Yes," Zachary confirmed, smiling. "I need something simple to move around Trondheim."

"I'm not an expert," Emily said, a feeble smile outlining her face. "But I have a friend who is good with cars. The good thing is that he is here in Norway."

"What does he do?"

"He is a professional race car driver." Emily beamed. "There are a few better informed than him when it comes to cars."

The corners of Zachary's mouth twitched slightly on hearing Emily's response. "I only need a car to move around Trondheim, not to go racing," he said, shaking his head. "Why bother a professional race car driver for that. Let's just forget it. I'll find another way."

"He's a simple person," Emily said, her voice taking on a seemingly imploring tone. "Moreover, buying cars is what he enjoys most. So, don't worry. You won't be putting any burden on him."

"Just forget it," Zachary said, his tone firm. "By the way, let me give you the match tickets before I forget." He added, fishing a small brown envelope from his gym bag.

"Did the club give you a lot of tickets?" Emily inquired, looking at Zachary's bag with a glitter in her eyes.

"They gave me twelve this time around," Zachary replied. "That's because this is my first home game for Rosenborg. Otherwise, I would have received only six like the rest of my teammates."

"That's great," Emily said excitedly. "Can you give me four? I have a few friends who would like to attend your game today evening?"

"Just take these away," Zachary replied, handing her the printed tickets. "I only need six for a few friends of mine. The rest, I was going to give them away on the bus to Lerkendal after here."

"Then give me the six. I do have use for the tickets."

"Okay," Zachary concurred, giving her two more printed tickets. "I guess I'll see you tomorrow then. I'm heading to Lerkendal now to start my match preparations."

"Okay," Emily said, a soft smile outlining her face. "I wish you luck in your game. Go, score so that we can make more money—sorry so that you can win the Tippeligaen."

Zachary creased a brow, wondering whether all agents were the same—always thinking about money. But he didn't dwell on the point since his agent was doing her best to earn him some cash. So, they said their goodbyes, and Zachary left for Lerkendal. Along the way, he didn't forget to call Kasongo and the rest of his friends to pick up their tickets before 1:00 PM that day.

After that, he relaxed and settled into Rosenborg's pre-match condition routine at Lerkendal while eagerly awaiting 7:00 PM—when he would play his first home game for Rosenborg.

When Zachary was starting his pre-match conditioning routine at Lerkendal, one of the officials in one of Rosenborg's top offices at Brakka received a call. He was Johan Arne Anderson, the BetNet representative that'd offered Emily an endorsement deal.

Johan picked up the phone and glanced at the screen before smiling to himself. "Did they take our bait?" He mumbled to himself before picking up the call.

"Hello Miss Anderson," he spoke into the phone. "It's nice to hear from you so soon. Did you consider?"

"I pitched the offer to my client, but he didn't agree," Emily replied politely, getting straight to the point. "He says that he wants to focus solely on football without thinking about anything else. So, he won't be entering any endorsement deals any time soon."

"You wish to turn down such an offer without even any negotiation?" Johan inquired, his voice rising slightly. "You know we are willing to adjust the terms to fit the client better."

"It's not about the terms," Emily countered from the other end of the line. "My client only wishes to develop his skills first before anything else. You should be happy about that since he's playing for your team. Right?"

"Yes, of course, I'm glad that such a player is on our team," Johan replied, keeping his voice steady. "That's why I'm even working hard to find him a good endorsement deal so that he can be more comfortable on the team."

"Oh," Emily said. "Then you don't have to worry. He's quite comfortable at the moment. You can see that from the way he's performing. But nevertheless, thank you for the offer. Goodbye." She ended the call right after.

Johan glanced at his phone for a moment before throwing it against the wall. He balled his fists, taking in deep breaths before straightening his tie and sitting down in one of the sofas in his office. But despite his efforts to calm himself down, he was still furious at the agent. She'd turned him down without any negotiation. He wondered whether the sum offered had not been to Zachary's liking, but that didn't make sense. He'd made an offer that most mid-level players in the Tippeligaen would find hard to reject.

"Let's start by increasing the offer and see what happens?" He mumbled, smiling like a rogue. "Money is usually the best solution for simple challenges."

Johan had to find a solution to get Zachary's signature as soon as possible. Otherwise, he would face it rough when he met with the rest of his colleagues.

## Chapter 138 - First Game On Home Ground

When Emily walked into the stands of Lerkendal Stadion that Wednesday evening, her brain stuttered for a moment, every part of her going on a pause. The momentum of the Rosenborg fans around her was astounding. They'd already gone crazy, chanting various Rosenborg songs as they waited for the match against Tromsø Idrettslag to commence. She was quite amazed by the passion on display.

"This match seems to be quite exciting already," Ryan Bellmore, her race car driver friend, yelled from beside her, trying to make himself heard over the noise. "Although the stadium is a bit small, the atmosphere can match that of White Hart Lane during some of the less popular match days."

"I told you," Emily replied, pushing past some of the fans and heading further into the stands. "Norwegian fans are very passionate. There's no way we'll fail to enjoy the match in this kind of atmosphere."

"That's unless Rosenborg loses." Ryan laughed as they started ascending the stairs and heading towards the seats in the middle.

"That won't happen," Emily said, her voice full of confidence. "You must have already seen the video of my client from the previous game. If he's starting, there's almost no chance for Rosenborg to lose."

"You have so much faith in him," Ryan said, beaming. "But I'm surprised that you allowed him to stay in the Norwegian league if he's that talented."

"It was his choice," Emily responded. "There wasn't a thing I could do about it without going against his wishes behind his back. That's against my working ethics as an agent. Where are the rest, by the way?" She asked, changing the topic.

"They should already be in the stadium," Ryan replied. "Let's find our seats first. We'll call them afterward."

In the home team's dressing room of Lerkendal Stadion, Coach Johansen was going over the main points of the game plan for the umpteenth time that evening.

"By all means," he said, sweeping his gaze across the entire room. "Let's do our best to keep a clean sheet during this game. We have been conceding a lot of goals over the past few games. That is completely unacceptable for a team of our caliber. So, the defenders and the holding midfielders—please, try your best to close down all the spaces in our defensive third when we're not on the ball. Are we together?"

"Yes, coach."

"Jonas and Mike," the Coach continued, turning towards the two. "You two are our double pivots—the holding midfielders. Please do your best to shield our four defenders from their attacking midfielders, especially from the incoming high balls. Don't allow their attacking midfielders, especially that Thomas Bendiksen, any room near our box."

"We also need to dominate possession and hold on to the ball for as long as possible so that we can create more chances. When we're not on the ball, we'll be using high-pressing tactics to win it back quickly before Tromsø can manage to mount an attack on us. Are we together?"

"Yes, coach."

"Zachary," he said, turning his gaze on him. "In this game, their defensive midfielders are likely to target you both in the middle and attacking third of the playing field. Don't panic when that happens. Just continue playing at your own pace—even if you don't touch the ball for long spells. Remember that attracting the attention of their defensive midfielders is your goal. Leave the rest for your teammates. Are we clear?"

"Yes, coach," Zachary replied solemnly.

"Okay, then." Coach Johansen nodded, smiling. "The rest, you should all know what to do. Play with confidence, keep it simple, and don't make mistakes. If you follow the game plan, I'm sure we'll win this game without any hustle. Any questions?"

All the players, including Zachary, remained silent as everything the coach said was crystal clear. The coach had been going over the game plan for the previous three days. So, the players had long crammed every part of it and could probably recite it in their sleep. They didn't need to ask any questions and remained silent. Zachary, on his part, started tightening his laces and then pulled up his stockings to ready himself for his first home game in the Rosenborg's white and black colors. He was eager to start the game and wished the coach would conclude his address immediately.

Meanwhile, Mr. Agnar Christensen, the head coach of Tromsø Idrettslag, was also concluding his pre-game pep talk in the visitor's dressing room.

"If my predictions are right," he said, smiling at his players. "Rosenborg will most likely use their new boy, Zachary, as their attacking midfielder, while Mike Jensen and Jonas will play in the defensive midfield."

"Using the three midfielders, they'll try to dominate us with quick passes in midfield while switching to wing play a few times during the game. They'll also try their best to disrupt our defensive shape by holding on to possession. That way, they could find a way to penetrate our defensive third if we lose our stability. Be that as it may, we don't have to play according to their tune." He paused, sweeping his gaze across his players.

"We don't have to dance to their tune," the coach continued, smirking. "That's why we'll be using our second game plan. Instead of man-marking, we'll utilize zonal marking against their players. When any Rosenborg player is on the ball, we'll use one of ours to close him down, whereas the rest will quickly close down the spaces around that given player. When shifting and pressing, we'll need to remain stable and prevent opening any holes in our midfield. That way, Rosenborg will find it hard to penetrate our defensive third. Are we together, my boys?"

"Yes, coach."



Coach Agnar Christensen beamed at his players. "We only have to sit back and close down the spaces in our defensive third. Whenever there's a chance, we'll hit Rosenborg either on the counter or with unexpected long and high balls to our forwards. That's how we win this game and return home with three points."

"And for Zachary Bemba, the new boy," the Tromsø coach continued.

"Since he performed very well in the previous game, my friend—Coach Johansen is most likely thinking that we'll target the boy in today's match. But who are we?"

"We're Tromsø, the boys of the North," all the players shouted in chorus, their chant reverberating across the dressing room like thunder.

Coach Agnar Christensen shrugged whimsically, his eyes crinkling behind his glasses. "Yes, we're Tromsø, the boys of the North," he said, his voice lowering. "We do what the opponents least expect us to do. So, we shall only use Ruben to keep the boy under check. No need to tight-mark him because I don't believe he is good at dribbling. However, when he is on the ball, we have to mark all the players, spaces, and passing routes into our defensive third."

"We must not allow any Rosenborg player to remain unmarked near our box when Zachary is on the ball. Otherwise, we shall get many troubles from his defense-splitting passes. Are we together, the defenders and holding midfielders?"

"Yes, coach."

The coach smiled and was about to continue—but suddenly, there was a knock on the door. One of the match officials slipped into the dressing room and said: "Coach, it's time. I hope you're ready."

Coach Christensen smiled at the match official, first casting a glance at his watch before replying. "Sorry, we'll be out in a few seconds. As you can see, we're already more than ready."

"Good, but please hurry up," the match official said, still maintaining a polite smile. "As you can see, it's already 12 minutes to seven. We're already running late." He added before exiting the dressing room.

"Okay, boys," Coach Christensen said, his voice turning solemn. "I believe I've already said everything there's to say about how we'll approach the game. The rest will be up to you as players. When out there, use your brains, mark the spaces, and we shall leave Trondheim with three points in the bag. Are we together?"

"Yes, coach."

"Okay, off you go," the coach intoned. "Off you go. We don't want to keep the match officials waiting. Do we?"

The players laughed at that and started exiting the dressing room.

When Zachary stepped onto the pitch, the noise from the stands completely engulfed him, seizing his brain and rendering any logical thought or deduction impossible for a brief moment. He was at a loss for words as he observed the chaos in the stands of Lerkendal Stadion.

"Shalalalalalala... oh Rosenborg, Shalalalalalala... oh Rosenborg, Shalalalalalala... oh Rosenborg..."

As Zachary walked on to the pitch, he could clearly perceive the chorus of loud cheering that had long reverberated across the stands in the stadium. At times, it would transition into a wave of insane excitement that washed over the entire crowd as the fans sang at the top of their lungs while clapping their hands. Their energy levels were something else—like they were high on some freakish drugs. They seemed more eager for the game when compared to the players themselves.

"Nervous?" Mikael Dorsin inquired from beside him as they lined up in front of the tunnel, preparing to begin pre-match team handshake.

"Not at all," Zachary replied honestly. "I'm quite excited, instead."

"That's great," the veteran defender said, his eyes still on the crowd in the stands. "Don't worry about the fans and play your own game. I'm sure you'll do great once again."

"Okay, thank you for your advice," Zachary replied, nodding.

A while later, the players of the two clubs performed the team handshake and soon took up their respective positions on the pitch. The Tippeligaen match between Rosenborg Ballklub and Tromsø Idrettslag was about to start at the Lerkendal Stadion in Trondheim.

### Chapter 139 - A Tricky Opponent

Kristin had been one of the first few fans to take up their seats in the stadium that evening. She was eagerly waiting for the kick-off as she enjoyed the cheery mood in the stadium.

"Welcome, everyone!" She heard the commentator say, his mellifluous voice booming over the chattering and cheering that'd been underscoring the entire stadium.

Kristin felt her spirits brighten on hearing the voice as it belonged to Kjell Roar Kaasa, one of her favorite commentators on the Norwegian football scene.

"Today is match-day 8 of the Tippeligaen," Kjell Roar continued. "It is an exciting meeting between the Troll Kids and the Boys from the North. Rosenborg Ballklub is facing off against Tromsø Idrettslag in a fixture that could have a marked impact on the progress of the two teams throughout this season."

"If Rosenborg wins, they'll have accumulated 16 points and will move on to the second position of the Tippeligaen table. They'll only remain in second place due to Strømsgodset's superior goal difference. On the other hand, if Tromsø wins, they'll have accumulated 13 points, enough to take them to the third position. That's at least until the rest of the teams play their games tomorrow. With me is Harald Brattbakk as the pundit for today's game. Harald!"

"Good evening, everyone," Kristin smiled on hearing Harald Brattbakk's voice. He was one of Rosenborg's legends. Very few could compare to him when it came to the goals he'd netted for Rosenborg.

"Coach Boyd Johansen has made a few changes to his squad from the weekend game," Kjell Roar said after a while. "Nicki Nielsen and Tore Reginiussen return to the starting eleven after that one-match

suspension. Zachary Bemba, Rosenborg's new star, makes his first start for Rosenborg. The eighteen-year-old gets another chance to shine after his incredible performance on the weekend. Harald! What's your take on all this?"

"Well," Harald said. "The Rosenborg coach has done a good job selecting his starting eleven. All Rosenborg's starting players are on form and can easily beat any team out there in the Tippeligaen at the moment. At least, they're the better team on paper."

"Troms?, on the other hand, is a hard team to defeat," he continued. "It's one of the most disciplined sides in the Tippeligaen. The boys from the North are good, especially when defending and disrupting the tempo of their opponents. I have this feeling that Rosenborg could find it hard to score any goals during this game."

"Do you have a prediction for us, Harald?"

"Not at the moment," Harald replied. "I can't make any predictions before the match begins. But if I were a gambler, I would be placing all my money on Rosenborg without a doubt."

"Of course, you would," Kjell Roar said jokingly. "With Rosenborg being your former team, I wouldn't be surprised."

Harald laughed at that.

"Okay, everyone," Kjell Roar hollered, his voice booming through the loudspeakers like thunder. "The referee has finally blown his whistle, and this incredible match between the Troll Kids and the Boys from the North is underway..."

Nicki Nielsen kicked the ball back into his half as soon as the referee blew the whistle. Zachary received it at the edge of the middle third of the playing field—and without any pause, he passed it towards Mike Jensen, one of Rosenborg's holding midfielders. Mike didn't dawdle and flicked it on to Jonas Svensson, the other holding midfielder in Rosenborg's 4-3-3 double-pivot formation.

But by then, a few of the Tromsø players had already rushed into Rosenborg's half. They didn't allow Jonas to receive the ball without any pressure. Zdenek Ondrasek, the Tromsø center forward, ran at him as if his life depended on it. Jonas could only turn back and pass back to the goalkeeper because of the intense pressure from the opponent.

As soon as Lund Hansen, the Rosenborg keeper, received the pass from Jonas, Zachary ran into space and opened himself up to receive the ball in the midfield. To his surprise, the Tromsø players didn't try their level best to chase after him—but remained in their positions, marking the spaces before their defensive third.

Although Zachary found it odd, he didn't bother himself to understand why that was happening. Instead, he ran further into his half, making sure to dash into a position where the Rosenborg goalkeeper could easily pass to him without interference from any other player.

As he expected, Lund Hansen spotted him a moment later. Without any dilly-dallying, the goalkeeper passed the ball to him before any Tromsø player could close him down.

Zachary received the pass from Lund Hansen in Rosenborg's defensive third. However, he wasn't without pressure. Thomas Bendiksen, the Tromsø number-8, closed in on him right away.

But Zachary controlled the ball well and exchanged a couple of one-touch passes with Mike Jensen and Jonas Svensson to maintain possession. For the next few minutes, he played like a maestro, running into spaces, receiving the ball, and playing short-but-precise passes as he helped Rosenborg dictate the game's tempo.

With those simple passes, the three Rosenborg midfielders managed to bring the game under their control. As a result, Rosenborg started to dominate possession as they passed the ball in the backfield, trying to draw the Tromsø players out of their defensive shape.

Nevertheless, the boys in blue jerseys didn't take the bait. Instead, the Tromsø players remained highly organized and maintained their 4-2-3-1 formation as if they weren't the least bit interested in winning the ball back. Only the one forward and the three attacking midfielders tried to put pressure on Zachary and his teammates. The rest stayed back, defending in front of their defensive third, without ever actively chasing after the ball.

"Push forward," Zachary heard Coach Johansen bellow from the sideline when the ball went out of play for a throw-in. "Play the ball forward or into the wing when you get a chance. Don't just play in our own half. Take the pressure to their side. Remember, this is not a contest for possession but goals." The coach yelled at the top of his lungs. He seemed angry and agitated by his team's performance even though they were dictating the proceedings.

On hearing the coach yelling, Zachary instantly opened himself up—by escaping from his mark. He wished to carry out the coach's instructions immediately.

He understood the coach's point as Rosenborg had not even once managed to penetrate Tromsø's defensive third and approach their box. The Tromsø players had properly marked all the spaces around the Rosenborg forwards ever since the match began.

They seemed to be sitting back and concentrating on defense without bothering so much to hinder Rosenborg's control of possession. Because of that, Zachary hadn't managed to find any defensive gap in their formation that he could exploit and deliver the ball to the forwards.

\*FWEEEEEEE\*

The referee blew the whistle, signaling for Rosenborg to take their throw-in. Mikael Dorsin, the Rosenborg left-back, threw the ball along the line—towards Tarik Elyounoussi, the Rosenborg left-forward, without any delay.

Tarik controlled it with his chest while shrugging off Hans Norbye, the Tromsø right-back, with his brute physique. He then spun with the ball hooked to his left leg and passed the ball towards Zachary, who'd long started running in sync with him through the middle.

Zachary controlled the ball, skipping past Ruben Jenssen, the Tromsø holding midfielder, as he stepped into the middle third of the playing field. Without even a single pause, he unleashed a return pass towards Tarik Elyounoussi, who'd long escaped his mark and was already racing across the left touchline like the wind.

Tarik controlled the ball with a deft first-touch, pushing it further forward as he continued racing across the left flank. He managed to step into Tromsø's defensive third in a matter of seconds. However, there,

he found an impenetrable roadblock of Troms? players. They'd already organized themselves into a suitable shape to deal with the speedy Rosenberg winger.

Tarik could only pass the ball into the middle since going forward would most likely result in him losing possession.

Zachary, of course, had long been anticipating Tarik's pass. With a deft first touch, he controlled the ball like an expert—and without any delay, continued pushing on towards Troms?'s box.

But he was soon closed down by Ruben Jenssen, one of Troms?'s holding midfielders. The Troms? midfielder had already retraced his steps to defend against Rosenberg's lightning-fast attack. Ruben was upon Zachary in seconds, denying him the chance to travel with the ball for more than a yard of space.

Zachary looked around to find a teammate as an outlet for the ball. However, the highly disciplined and tactical Troms? players had already checked all the Rosenberg forwards and attacking midfielders around him.

The Troms? players had left one man to keep him in check while the others closed down any gaps around his teammates. Zachary could immediately tell that they were trying to counter his passes with zone marking. They wanted to eliminate all the available ball-receiving options so that they could render his passing skills useless. That way, they would be able to deny him many chances of impacting the game.

Despite that, he didn't panic since he'd long gotten used to running and dribbling in almost every match during his academy days. He wasn't the least bit scared of facing the Troms? players head-on.

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## Chapter 140 - A Sigh

In the stands, Kristin Stein watched the proceedings on the pitch with rapt attention as Zachary got cornered by a mean-looking Troms? midfielder. With her ample experience of spectating football matches, she could easily guess that the opponents were trying to silence Zachary by closing down all his passing options.

"There we have it," she heard Kjell Roar yell out loud, his booming voice coming to her from a nearby stadium loudspeaker. "Troms? is clearly defense-minded in today's game. Their marking in their defensive third is astounding. Zachary Bemba, the Rosenborg number-33, has been isolated by the highly disciplined Troms? defense. He has no passing options. Oh! What will he do?" Kjell Roar added, his tone turning dramatic towards the very end.

"If I were him, I would just take it easy and pass back to my defenders or goalkeeper," Harald Brattbakk chipped in. "Rather than risking..." he stopped mid-sentence as if he'd been interrupted by something.

"Oh! What have we here," Kjell Roar yelled after a moment.

Kristin's focus was on the pitch the entire time. She watched as Zachary flicked the ball to one side before bolting past Ruben Jenssen, Troms?'s defensive midfielder, with his incredible pace born from his long strides. In a matter of seconds, he gained himself a few yards of space and found himself bearing down on Troms?'s defensive line.

He kept running towards Troms?'s box until Josh Pritchard, the other holding-midfielder, was—forced to leave his position to close him down. But that was what Zachary had been anticipating as Josh had left an exploitable gap in Troms?'s defensive line.

Thus, no sooner had Josh left his position than Zachary flicked the ball towards Nicki Nielsen, who'd long escaped his mark. Nicki didn't disappoint since he was then only marked by one defensive player rather than two. He controlled the ball well, stepping further away from another opponent—and soon, was on his way, racing towards Troms?'s box like the wind.

Kristin felt her heartbeat quicken as Nicki Nielsen, the Rosenborg number-9, dashed past another Troms? player. Like the rest of the fans around her, she stood up from her seat, not wishing to miss any moment of Rosenborg's first chance at goal. However, a moment later, Miika Koppinen, the Troms? center back, rushed at Nicki, slid in, and tackled the ball away from his feet. He sent the forward tumbling to the ground a couple of yards away from the box.

"Oh, my!" Kjell Roar, the commentator, yelled at the top of his lungs, his voice smothering all the sighs and curses of the Rosenborg fans in the stadium.



"The captain of Tromsø has just committed a foul in a rather dangerous position at the edge of the box. The referee has shown him a yellow card and awarded Rosenborg a free-kick. Harald! Do you think we may get to see another masterpiece from the young Zachary this early in the match?"

"As you can see from the screen, even Tromsø's coach is clearly displeased and frustrated by the foul in such a position," Harald, the pundit for the game, commented. "That set-piece is only a couple of yards further away from goal than the one Zachary scored against Aalesunds FK on the weekend. He should be able to produce something spectacular here if he's given a chance. That's the reason Coach Agnar Christensen's facial expression has morphed into a scary frown. I'm sure that he'll have a lot to say to his captain at halftime."

Kjell Roar laughed at that. "But we have to commend the decisiveness of the Tromsø captain. If he'd left Nicki Nielsen unchecked, he would have still made his way into the box. And that would still spell trouble for the boys from the North."

"True that," Harald replied. "Had he not made the foul, Nicki might already be celebrating another one of his goals for this season."

"Okay, then," Kjell Roar said. "Let's take you back to the action. The referee has finished organizing the wall. And as we had expected, it is Zachary Bemba standing on the set-piece. Will he produce another incredible finish like the one on the weekend? Let's wait and see."

Zachary took a few steps back after assessing the positioning of the players in the box. That time around, his teammates had unanimously allowed him to be the set-piece taker due to his weekend's performance. Thus, he wished to live up to their expectations and help his team convert the set-piece.

\*FWEEEEEEE\*

The referee blew the whistle, motioning for Zachary to take the set piece. Zachary took a deep breath and slowly gathered momentum. He soon started jogging towards the ball while barring out any outside noise from affecting his delivery. Using his highly mastered Bend-it like-Beckham Juju, he took a final jump step and then walloped the ball with the inside of his left boot.

All the while, he kept his eyes focused on the ball as he made contact, unleashing a curling free-kick towards the goal.

Kristin's eyes followed the ball as it curved around the wall of five Tromsø players, whizzing towards the goal like a stinger missile out of its launcher. She felt her heartbeat quicken and raised her arms as the ball made an impossible curve before dipping as it whirled towards the inside of the post. Kristin could tell that Zachary had taken the free-kick well as it was clearly bound for the back of the net.

However, before she could celebrate, the Tromsø keeper jumped high like he had wings and touched the whirling ball slightly with his fingertips. The ball deviated from its intended course and smashed off the crossbar before bouncing back into the field of play.

"Oh, my," Kjell Roar yelled at the top of his voice. "What an unbelievable save from Marcus Salman, the Tromsø number-1. That's some incredible stuff here. Fantastic effort from Zachary! He did everything right and delivered a set piece that was clearly heading for the top right corner. However, what a phenomenal save. In the 17th minute, Zachary has been denied the chance to put Rosenborg ahead."

Kristin could only sigh at the missed opportunity.