

Greatest 141

Chapter 141 - Unlucky

"Rosenborg's chance isn't over yet, though," Kjell Roar, the commentator, yelled at the top of his lungs. "Nicki Nielsen, the Rosenborg number-9, has just pounced on the ball that has just smashed off the crossbar. What have we here?"

Kristin's eyes were still following the ball. She quivered with anticipation as she saw Nicki Nielsen skip past Miika Koppinen, the Tromsø captain, and direct a diving header towards the inside of the right post from around the penalty spot. She could feel it deep in her bones that Rosenborg was about to score.

However, the goddess of luck seemed to have abandoned team Rosenborg. Marcus Sahlman, the Tromsø keeper, sprang into action once more. He leaped from the ground like a leopard and intercepted Nicki's effort with an outstretched arm.

"Oh, what a chance—and what a save!" Kristin heard Kjell Roar utter words at the pace of a machine gun. "Nicki Nielsen was the quickest to the rebound. He managed to plant that beautiful diving header towards the goal. But the ball is just shy of the right post by mere centimeters after being intercepted by the keeper's strong arm. The linesman points to the corner flag, awarding Rosenborg BK a corner kick."

"This is some unbelievable stuff from Marcus Sahlman, the Tromsø goalkeeper. He has managed to make two incredible saves within a span of a single minute. I can't believe it. Harald!"

"Well," Harald, the pundit, chipped in, his voice thundering over the sighs of the dejected Rosenborg fans in the stadium. "Yes, I agree with your conjecture. At the moment, it's Rosenborg versus Marcus Sahlman. The way he managed to cover ground across his line and save Zachary's effort was something out of this world. But what was better was how quickly he reacted to intercept Nicki's rebound effort and deny the Troll Kids from taking the lead in the 17th minute. He is in top shape today."

"Thank you, Harald," Kjell Roar said. "Let's take you back to the action. Jonas Svensson, the Rosenborg holding midfielder, is getting ready to take the corner..."

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The referee blew the whistle, signaling for Rosenborg to take the corner. Jonas Svensson took the corner-kick and delivered a teasing cross into the crowded box.

Zachary assessed the trajectory of the corner ball in nothing but a flash. He then shrugged off his mark and pushed through the rest of the players with the intent to meet the descending ball. All the while, he kept his eyes locked on it as his mind worked in overdrive to judge the best way he could connect with it.

He'd already practiced a variety of corner drills with his teammates during the pre-match training sessions. He was sure that his running wouldn't affect or interfere with the rest of his teammates when attacking the corner ball in team Tromsø's box.

So, he confidently took advantage of his looming height, pushed off the ground like an amphibian, and then out-jumped all the other players in the box to connect with the ball. He managed to shrug off one of the opposing center-backs in midair and planted a header from around the penalty area towards the inside of the right post. [Please go in.] He thought to himself as he started his descent back to the ground.

"BAAM"

But no sooner had his feet touched the ground than he saw the ball smash off the right post before bouncing back into the pitch—towards the right flank. Zachary didn't dawdle—but chased after it by sheer reflex. But Miika Koppinen, the Tromsø captain, beat him to it and cleared it to safety. The referee pointed to the corner flag once again.

Zachary could only punch the empty air before him in dejection while sighing inwardly at the missed opportunity. The goal post had denied Rosenborg a chance to take the lead once more in the 21st minute. The deadlock between the two sides was still on.

In the home team's dugout, Coach Johansen frowned on seeing his team miss another chance. Nicki Nielsen had managed to latch on to a precise through-pass from Zachary Bemba before firing a low shot towards the right side of the net. However, Marcus Sahlman, the Tromsø keeper, leaped like a salmon to

deny him with an outstretched foot. Tromsø had once again survived conceding a goal in the 42nd minute just before halftime.

"We're quite unlucky in this game," Coach Johansen said to Trond Henriksen, his assistant. "On a good day, the two attempts by Zachary should have turned into goals. Even Nicki's rebound effort should have found its way to the back of the net. But in this game, they were just mere shots on target. We're quite unlucky."

"Yes," Coach Henriksen said. "By my estimation, I believe we're dominating possession by 70% and above. We even have more than ten shots on goal. However, we have still failed to score, and this is turning out to be quite the hard game."

"Exactly, we need to score soon, or else—we'll face problems later on during the game," Coach Johansen concurred, still following the proceedings on the field of play.

Nicki Nielsen, Rosenborg's number-9, had just latched on to the cross from the corner kick. He was the first player to get to the rebound from the corner ball—but the Tromsø keeper managed to save the day once again. The keeper committed himself to a full-body dive and made a comfortable save.

"Their goalkeeper's form is also a problem for us today," Coach Trond Henriksen commented. "I'm proposing that we switch to the 4-3-3 attacking and lose the double pivots in our defensive midfield. That way, we'll be able to commit more bodies forward and test the keeper more frequently than we have been doing ever since the start of the match."

"We can't do that with Tromsø," Coach Johansen replied, shaking his head. "I'm sure that Coach Agnar Christensen has been waiting for us to do exactly that. If we dare move even a single defensive player forward, we'll regret it. I have a feeling that Tromsø can beat us easily on the counter."

"So, what are we to do then?"

"Let's be patient with the boys," Coach Johansen replied, his eyes still following the goings-on on the pitch. "We are still tied at 0:0. So, we'll try to motivate the attacking midfielders and forwards to work harder and create more chances during the second half. All that matters is that we get a goal as soon as possible. I believe that one goal will be enough to kill the defensive momentum of Tromsø."

"Okay, then," Coach Trond Henriksen replied, nodding.

Emily Anderson, Zachary's agent, started feeling quite agitated as the match proceeded on to the later stages of the second half. She'd hoped that Zachary would score another goal and heighten his reputation among the Rosenborg fans. That way, he would be able to attract more endorsement deals. But the match had progressed in an undesirable way, beyond her expectations.

Rosenborg had played good attacking football, pressurizing all the Tromsø players back into their own side of the pitch ever since the beginning of the second half. Balls always seemed to smash off the crossbar—while at other times, the Tromsø keeper made flamboyant saves to deny Rosenborg any chance of taking the lead. Thanks to that, the game still remained at a 0:0 deadlock with only five minutes to go. Emily could feel the frustration slowly starting to pulse through her veins.

"Although Rosenborg has failed to score, your client has still put up quite a good performance," Ryan Bellmore commented after seemingly noticing her frustration. "So, cheer up already."

"A good performance doesn't mean much if it doesn't translate into match-winning opportunities," Emily replied, her eyes still following the goings-on in the game. "For instance, if Rosenborg fails to win or worse, loses the game—then all that the fans will remember will be the team's poor performance. Nothing else will be on their minds since they care most about the results."

"Oh, I see," Ryan replied, nodding. "But you should know that if your client were to score in such an intense game, where his team is struggling, the effect would be much more impactful on the Rosenborg fanbase. He would be able to grow his reputation in an instant as the match-winner."

"I'm also hoping for that," Emily replied, smiling. "It pains me that I haven't been able to get him a single endorsement deal within two months. I hope this situation changes soon. Otherwise, I'll have failed him as his agent."

Zachary received a return pass from Mike Jensen as he stepped into the middle third of the playing field. He controlled it like a pro, skipping past Ruben Jenssen, one of Tromsø's defensive midfielders.

He could feel that the game was almost ending and knew well that he couldn't afford to dilly dally with the ball. He needed to distribute it to the forwards so that they could create goal-scoring chances for Rosenborg immediately. He didn't want his first game at Lerkendal to end in a draw or worse—a loss.

So, he looked up the field—and an instant later, he managed to spot Tarik Elyounoussi, the Rosenborg left-forward, unmarked in the left-wing. Zachary smiled to himself before flicking the ball further forward and slaloming his way past a sliding tackle from one of the opponents. A moment later, he smacked the ball—with the outside of his boot, sending it on a swerving trajectory towards the left-wing, where Tarik was waiting.

Tarik controlled the ball beautifully and sped off in a wavy run across the left touchline, spearing deeper and deeper into Tromsø's half with his incredible pace. He managed to dash past a couple of Tromsø players even before they could react. In a matter of seconds, he stepped into the final third and started cutting into the pitch, heading towards Tromsø's goal.

Tarik seemed to have gained an extra boost of energy. He skipped over a sliding tackle, bringing the ball with him before continuing his mad dash towards Tromsø's box. It seemed like he could keep going with the ball and score by depending on his incredible pace. However, his run was soon brought to an end by Miika Koppinen, the Tromsø captain, a while later. Mika galloped towards the sprinting Tarik like a runaway horse and slid in, sending Tarik tumbling to the ground in the left flank.

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The referee blew his whistle and awarded Rosenborg a free-kick. He then ran up to Miika Koppinen, the Tromsø captain, and showed him a second yellow card. After that, the referee awarded him a red card and asked him politely to leave the field of play. Rosenborg then had the one-man advantage over Tromsø.

Chapter 142 - A Flawless Curveball

"In the 87th minute, Rosenborg has gained a one-man advantage over Tromsø due to a red card," Kristin heard Kjell roar say. "Can Rosenborg capitalize on this advantage and punish Tromsø within the remaining three minutes plus injury time? Or will Coach Agnar Christensen and his boys from the North keep Rosenborg at bay for the remainder of the game? Harald! What say you?" The voice of the commentator boomed over the loud chattering and cheering through the stadium's loudspeakers.

"My money is still on Rosenborg," Harald, the pundit for that day's game, replied. "The Rosenborg players have been exceptional when moving forward ever since the start of the game. They have dominated possession and have over twenty shots on goal. Nicki, Zachary, and Tarik have all hit the crossbar or goal post at one point in the game. I feel like they have been truly unlucky for the score to remain deadlocked at 0:0."

"But we can't take away anything from team Tromsø's performance," the pundit continued. "The boys from the North have remained true to their tactics and very disciplined when under pressure. I really commend them for their efforts. But since their captain has received a red card, it will be quite a challenge to continue keeping the Troll Kids at bay. Tromsø is not the same without Miika Koppinen, their center back and captain."

"Thank you, Harald," Kjell Roar said. "Let's take you back to the action. The referee has almost finished organizing the wall and the players in the box. But quite a few Rosenborg players are still in a huddle, discussing how to take the free-kick, which is in a very tight angle, by the way. Will it be Zachary once again on the set piece? Or will Rosenborg go with Mike Jensen or probably Tarik?"

Kristin Stein returned her full attention to the field of play. In the left-wing, close to the box, she could see Zachary, Tarik Elyounoussi, Mike Jensen, Tore the captain, and Mikael Dorsin huddled together over the ball. They seemed to be deep in discussion, strategizing on how to convert the free-kick. As the pundit had said, the set-piece position was in a very tight angle, only a few meters away from the goal line. It was also close to Tromsø's box, only three to five meters, by her estimation. But Kristin was still in doubt whether any player could manage to convert it from such an angle.

Contrary to what the commentators had said, Zachary and co were not discussing the strategy for the set-piece. Instead, they were still debating on who would take it.

"Zachary," Tarik, the left forward, said, smiling slightly. "I think you should leave this one to me. After all, you've already taken one during the first half."

'...and failed to score', Zachary thought inwardly, a wry smile outlining his face. Unlike in the first half, all the players had not unanimously agreed to let him take the set-piece. Both Tarik Elyounoussi and Mike Jensen wanted a go at it since they also had proven track records of converting free-kicks.

"Let's do it like this," Mikael Dorsin chipped in. "Let's leave this one to Zachary. Tarik, you can take the next one while Mike will take the one after that. We shall continue the rotation in the next match. Let's not continue the debate since we need to concentrate on successfully converting the set-piece. After all, the referee has almost finished organizing the wall."

"I second that," Tore Reginiussen, the Rosenborg captain, said. He then turned to Zachary. "This free-kick position needs a good right leg. But I've noticed that you mostly use your left when shooting. How confident are you?" He asked, raising a brow.

"My right is as good as my left," Zachary replied, voice filled with confidence. "So, I have a pretty high chance of successfully converting the set-piece if the keeper doesn't perform abnormally like in the first half."

"Okay, then," the captain said, nodding. "You'll be the man to take the set-piece. Do your best and try to convert successfully." He patted Zachary's back.

"Thanks a lot," Zachary replied. "I'll try my best."

"Well, then," Mikael chipped in, smiling. "Since we have already decided on who will be taking the set-piece, should we move on to the strategy?"

"No need," Zachary said, starting to position the ball on the green. "I'll be going directly for the goal. Just try making runs towards the goalposts, just in case there's a rebound."

"Okay then, let's leave you to your preparations," Mikael said, wiping the sweat off his forehead with the back of his hand. "The referee has finished organizing the wall. If you can, go for a hard one close to the far post. Trust me: you'll surely beat the keeper that way. We wish you good luck." He added before turning around and starting to head into Tromsø's box.

"Thank you for your advice," Zachary said, smiling. "I'll try my best."

"Good luck..."

"Good luck..."

The rest also said a few encouraging words before following Mikael into Tromsø's box. Both Mike and Tarik didn't seem the least bit displeased by the captain's decision on who was taking the set-piece. Nevertheless, Zachary was sure that should his attempt fail to meet their expectations, they wouldn't compromise with him that easily when there was another set-piece situation in the near future.

So, he took a deep breath and calmed his mind, making sure to do away with any redundant thoughts that could cloud his thought process and affect his delivery. He needed to be in a highly focused state if he wanted to convert the set-piece successfully.

When he was sure his mind had achieved a proper tranquil state, he started scrutinizing the positioning of the wall and the players in Tromsø's box. In the meantime, his mind worked like a supercomputer, trying to deduce the best way to take the free-kick.

Since it was the 88th minute, tensions were high among the players in the box. They were either pushing or pulling at each other, trying their best to outmaneuver their opponents and connect with the incoming free-kick.

Even the Tromsø players making up the wall were no different. They tried on multiple times to shorten the distance between themselves and the set-piece position. For a minute, disorder and confusion were all there was inside Tromsø's box. The referee had to give plenty of verbal warnings and confer three yellow cards to players from both teams to calm the situation.

Zachary took all that in with a relaxed and detached gaze as he waited for the whistle to take the set-piece. His lips bore the semblance of a smile—just enough to show that he was enjoying his thoughts.

He had become as calm as the sea before a storm because of his well-earned self-confidence born from practicing the Bend-it-like-Beckham Juju thousands of times. He was a player unburdened and free from any tension at that moment.

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The referee finally blew the whistle after organizing the situation in the box.

Zachary didn't dilly-dally since he'd already finished his preparations. He took a few steps back from the ball and angled his body in such a way that he was facing in the direction of Rosenborg's goal.

He then took a peek at the corner flag and noticed that it was very still. At that moment, he could safely conclude that there was no wind to affect his shot.

For a slight moment, the corners of his mouth stretched further into a brief suppressed grin as he realized he didn't need to factor in the breeze into his set-piece technique. The absence of a breeze would make his job less demanding. So, he began his short run-up to the ball without any needless worries.

With his eyes locked on the ball, he angled his body and connected with the ball with his instep while having his ankle locked. He hit the ball slightly on the side, just below the center, with the inside of his right boot to make it spin as it flew through the air. Zachary felt like he had executed the Bend-it-like-Beckham Juju with the greatest of perfection at that instant.

Coach Johansen felt his heartbeat quicken as he watched Zachary take the free-kick after making an angled run towards the ball. The African boy unleashed a beautiful yet simple inside of the boot curveball that soared past the wall—into the air, seemingly targeted towards the crowd of players in Tromsø's box.

For a moment, Coach Johansen thought that Zachary had decided to cross the ball into the box for his teammates to make the finish. But an instant later, he noticed the curveball dipping slightly once again before curling further to find its way into the top right corner, beyond the reach of the keeper.

1:0.

Zachary had managed to put Rosenborg ahead with his flawlessly executed curveball from an impossibly tight angle in the 88th minute.

Coach Johansen raised his arms in the air and ran around the technical area like he'd gone mad. He could hardly contain his happiness. He'd been waiting for his team to score for an entire eighty-eight minutes. But his team had failed on multiple occasions to put the ball in the back of the net even after having long spells of dominating possession.

Coach Johansen had been frustrated and thought the game would end up as a draw. But then, with Zachary's goal, he could finally let go and relax. So, he pumped his fists in the air a few times before returning his full attention to the corner flag where his players were celebrating the goal.

But to his dismay, Zachary had removed his shirt once again and thrown it into the stands. At that moment, a few Rosenborg fans were busy struggling to get their hands on the number-33 jersey. Coach Johansen's previously beaming face morphed into a scary frown. A player taking off his shirt translated into a pointless yellow, which would affect his squad as the season progressed.

"Didn't any of you inform him not to take off his shirt once again?" He questioned Trond Henriksen, his assistant.

"We did," Trond Henriksen replied, still grinning after celebrating the goal. "But I guess he couldn't keep himself in check since he was too happy after scoring."

Coach Johansen sighed. "Those are two yellows in two matches now. We need to make sure this doesn't happen again. Otherwise, Zachary will be facing suspension soon due to accumulating yellow cards."

"Sure," Coach Henriksen replied. "I'll have a serious talk with him before the next match."

Chapter 143 - A Dead-Ball Specialist I

"Zachary, *clap*clap, Rosenborg, *clap*clap*, Zachary, *clap*clap..."

The fans around Kristin had long gone mad with euphoria. After Zachary scored that perfect free-kick from the tight angle, everyone around her had jumped up in joy and started clapping their hands while singing his name.

A storm of excitement had taken over the sections of the stands with Rosenborg fans, and it hadn't died down ever since the moment of the goal. Kristin, too, joined in on the cheering and celebrating as she felt like the golden age of Rosenborg had returned once again. She couldn't believe that the simple boy, who'd come to Europe only two years ago, could put up such a display within a week after making his debut for Rosenborg.

"Well then, that was some incredible stuff from Zachary Bemba," Kristin heard Kjell Roar, the commentator, yell out loud. He seemed to be trying to make himself heard over the loud singing and cheering that'd taken over Lerkendal Stadion.

"Okay, even I, as a commentator, I'm at a loss for words after having witnessed that free-kick," Kjell Roar continued. "Simple but effective from a tight angle and boom—the ball is in the back of the net, beyond the reach of Marcus Sahlman, the keeper. That was genius from the 18-year-old Rosenborg number-33. Harald! You've been smiling to yourself ever since Zachary scored that goal."

"Yes, of course," Harald Brattbakk chipped in. "I'm quite sure that anyone who enjoys football will smile or laugh when they get a chance to witness such a goal..."

"Let me correct you there," Kjell Roar interrupted him. "I'm sorry to say, but not everyone could smile and appreciate the goal the way you did. Take a look at the stands with the Tromsø fans and tell me if they are pleased after having witnessed the goal."

Harald laughed at that before continuing. "My bad, then. As I was saying, that goal was a result of a flawlessly executed effective curveball. I've to say that Zachary is one player with bottomless talent. His technique when taking the free-kick was the epitome of perfection. Textbook perfection, if I'm to say. I was amazed by his angled run-up to the ball and then his composure when making contact to unleash that curve beyond the wall and into the top right corner. What was better was that he went for the far post. Everything was textbook perfect, and he kept the keeper guessing until the very last moment."

"Zachary must have practiced this technique countless times on the training ground," the pundit continued. "For me, this signifies the making of a great player."

"Does his technique remind you of someone?" Kjell Roar inquired.

"Well, yes," Harald was quick to reply, his voice animated. "His set-piece technique has an uncanny resemblance to that of David Beckham. But I believe he has made the technique his own. You can see that from his accuracy. He can find the back of the net from any angle around the box. Last weekend, against Aalesunds, he netted one from the edge of the box in front of the arc. This time around, he has scored one from a tight angle close to the goal line. He's one hell of a dead-ball specialist."

"Thank you, Harald," Kjell Roar said. "Let's take you back to the live-action, where the game has just restarted after the goal. Coach Agnar Christensen has reacted quickly and brought on Adnan Causevic, another defender, to cover for the gap left by his captain after the red card. Team Troms? are slowly passing the ball in their backfield..."

Kristin returned her attention to the playing field after calming down from all the excitement of celebrating Rosenborg's first goal. She continued following the match proceedings as the Troms? players tried to hold on to the ball in their backfield.

But Troms?'s efforts to horde possession were fruitless. The Rosenborg players didn't let up the heat even after taking the lead. Instead, they increased their counter-pressing intensity. They ran at any of the opposing players with the ball like tireless madmen, never giving them even a second to relax with the ball. A while later, they managed to force the Troms? players to play the ball high towards their center forward. The boys from the North could no longer take the pressure from Rosenborg in their backfield.

Kristin smiled, thinking that Rosenborg would soon regain possession and resume attacking once again. But to her dismay, Jonas Svensson, one of Rosenborg's defensive midfielders, mistimed the long ball when he tried to intercept it.

The color drained out of Kristin's face as she watched the ball bounce into Rosenborg's defensive third, beyond the reach of Tore Reginiussen, and towards Zdenek Ondrasek, the Troms? center forward.

The tricky long ball had taken out the two holding midfielders and one center back from the equation, leaving Zdenek Ondrasek unmarked for a brief while. Rosenborg was in deep trouble for the first time since the match started.

Zdenek Ondrasek pounced on the ball like a cat that had detected some catnip and controlled it like the pro he was. Without any wavering, he spun around with the ball hooked to his left foot, skipping past Stefan Strandberg, one of Rosenborg's center backs, in the process. He then fed the ball forward and took off towards Rosenborg's box, leaving the Rosenborg defenders in the dust.

"Oh, my, what have we here," Kristin heard Kjell Roar yell, his voice turning dramatic. "A long ball has magically found its way to Zdenek Ondrasek, and he's bolting towards Rosenborg's box like a bullet train. Lund Hansen, the Rosenborg keeper, comes out to meet him. Zdenek chips the ball over the keeper. Oh, my! What a missed opportunity! The Rosenborg goalkeeper managed to get his fingertips on the ball, pushing it away from his goal. What a save! It's a corner kick for Troms?."

Kristin let out a pent-up breath of air as she watched the ball sail out of play, missing the goalpost by mere centimeters. In the 91st minute, Rosenborg had survived conceding a goal.

"I guess the Rosenborg defensive players have been asleep for too long," Harald, the match pundit, commented in a flat voice. "That missed ball that allowed Zdenek Ondrasek to gain that game-changing opportunity was due to a lapse in the concentration of the Rosenborg players. I didn't expect such laxity to appear here in this top level of football."

"Talking about the laxity in concentration," Kjell Roar chipped in. "Coach Johansen has reacted immediately. Ole Selnes, another young player of Rosenborg, has started warming up. He should be coming on for Jonas Svensson, the defensive midfielder, who mistimed that long ball and created all the trouble."

"Well," Harald said. "We only have four minutes of added time for this game. If I were Rosenborg's coach, I would also start making substitutions at this juncture. He only needs to protect the one-goal lead and shouldn't allow for any risks of conceding a goal to happen. Substitutions can help him waste some time while giving the players a few seconds to relax from the intensity of the game."

"Let's take you back to the action," Kjell Roar said, his voice rising a bit. "Hans Norbye, the Troms? right-back, launches a powerful cross from the corner into the box. But Tore Reginiussen, the Rosenborg captain, out-jumps the rest of the players and intercepts the ball, heading it to the outside of the box..." The commentator intoned words at the pace of a machine gun while switching from English to Norwegian and back a couple of times.

Chapter 144 - A Dead-Ball Specialist II

Kristin's entire focus was on the field of play. She watched with nervous anticipation as Mike Jensen, one of Rosenborg's defensive midfielders, shrugged off an opponent before heading the just-cleared ball further away from his box. He managed to direct it towards the right-wing, where Tobias Mikkelsen was lurking.

Tobias Mikkelsen, the Rosenborg left-forward, controlled it well close to the touchline in the right-wing. And without any delay, he fed it past Saliou Ciss, the Tromsø left-back, before beating him for pace. He was soon rushing across the touchline, heading towards Tromsø's half like a bullet train on the rails.

The counter-attack was on. The fans around Kristin rose from their seat due to the lightning-fast intensity of the counter-attack.

Josh Pritchard, one of Tromsø's defensive midfielders, soon rushed at the sprinting Rosenborg left forward to close him down. Tobias didn't try to dribble past him. Instead, he flicked the ball onto his right foot and unleashed a cut-back pass into the middle of the pitch where Zachary had just arrived.

Zachary controlled the ball mid-sprint without slowing down. Without wasting even a single second, he continued bolting like a cheetah towards Tromsø's side of the field. He was so fast that he managed to race across the middle third of the pitch in just a couple of seconds.

Ruben Jenssen, the other Tromsø defensive midfielder, came to close down Zachary's run as he stepped past the middle third. Zachary flicked the ball to Nicki Nielsen, who'd long run into space and opened himself up to receive a pass in the left-wing.

Nicki Nielsen didn't disappoint. He latched on to Zachary's pin-point pass before cutting into the pitch and making a diagonal run at Tromsø's defensive line like the wind. He was upon one of the defenders in a matter of seconds.

Nicki didn't lose his composure when faced with the blockade by the defender. Instead, he started flicking the ball from his left to right foot as he slowly approached the box from the flanks.

"Pass! Pass!" Kristin heard many of the Rosenborg fans in the stadium start yelling at Nicki Nielsen. That was because he'd held on to the ball longer than necessary and held back Rosenborg's lightning-swift counter-attack. Down the field of play, Zachary, Tarik, and Tobias Mikkelsen had already arrived—and were eagerly waiting for a return pass from Nicki.

However, the number-9 seemed not to have heard the imploring calls of the fans. Nicki Nielsen continued trying to dribble past Jaroslav Fojut, the Tromsø center back, until the latter was—forced to push out his leg to make contact with the ball. The action seemed to be what Nicki had been

anticipating. The next instant, Nicki accelerated, trying to bolt past Jaroslav Fojut and step into Tromsø's box.

But the Tromsø center back was having none of his nonsense. He shifted his body slightly, planting himself into the sprinting path of the number-9. That way, Jaroslav Fojut managed to bar the striker from entering his box.

Kristin winced as she watched the Rosenborg number-9 collide head-on with the Tromsø center back before ricocheting backward and collapsing supine on the ground.

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The referee blew the whistle, awarding Rosenborg yet another free-kick in a dangerous position at the corner of the 18-yard-box. But none of the Rosenborg players celebrated as Nicki was still lying on the ground after bearing the full brunt of the collision with the Tromsø center back. He seemed to be in a lot of pain.

"That was some nasty full-body block by Jaroslav Fojut on Nicki Nielsen," Kristin heard Kjell Roar, the commentator, say. "The referee has shown a yellow card to the Tromsø center back for that nasty obstruction. He's lucky to have escaped a red card."

"You are right, Kjell," Harald chipped in. "The center-back was the last man barring Nicki from the keeper and the goal. In my opinion, it should have been another red for Tromsø. But he got away lightly with a yellow."

"But still," Kjell Roar cut in, "Rosenborg has gotten another chance to have a go at Tromsø's goal with another set-piece from yet another dangerous position. We might get a chance to see more magic from Zachary this evening." He added, his voice animated.

Kristin returned her full attention to the pitch. The medics had arrived and were helping Nicki Nielsen off the pitch. In the meantime, Zachary had already picked up the ball and seemed ready to take the set-piece once again. Kristin could feel the fans around her getting animated as they waited for Zachary to perform his magic once more.

On the pitch, on the left flank, Zachary bent down and positioned the ball just outside the corner of the 18-yard-box. The rest of Zachary's teammates had unanimously agreed to let him take the free-kick once again. Not even Mike Jensen or Tarik Elyounoussi, the other set-piece takers on the team, had raised a complaint. It seemed like they'd finally recognized his skill as a dead-ball specialist.

"Young man, don't try to act smart by shortening the distance," the referee said, interrupting him. "Move the ball a little bit back. The foul was—committed a couple of meters from the box. Not at the edge."

Zachary could only smile wryly on hearing the referee. Without any complaints, he picked up the ball and moved it a few meters back from the edge of the box. Zachary wasn't the least bit worried as the extra distance wouldn't affect his accuracy by that much. He'd spent hours training how to convert set-pieces from various areas of the attacking third. He was confident he would hit the target as long as he was anywhere near the opponent's box.

FWEEEEEEE

The referee blew his whistle after organizing the wall and the rest of the players in the box. Zachary reacted instantly, taking a deep breath to calm himself down before stepping back from the ball.

For the third time during that game, he made his short angled run-up to the ball by following the motions of the Bend-it like Beckham Juju. He then took the final jump step and made his desired ideal contact with the ball, sending it spinning on a curling trajectory towards the inside of the top left corner.

The ball soared into the air, flying over the wall and then dipping slightly before curving further outside—out of the goalkeeper's reach. And without any surprise, it homed into the back of the net like a ballistic missile finding its intended target. The Troms? keeper couldn't even react and stayed rooted in one position, seemingly wondering what the hell had happened.

2:0.

The cheers that rose in Lerkendal Stadium were as loud as the greatest of celebratory firework explosions. Rosenborg had managed to score its second goal in the 93rd minute, with only a single minute off added time remaining on the clock.

Zachary felt a sudden flare of joy streak through him like a comet after seeing the ball nestled in the back of the net. Like the previous times, he ran to the corner flag to celebrate and express his delight after netting the goal. However, before he could reach his destination, Mikael Dorsin, the Rosenborg assistant captain, intercepted him along the way.

"If you dare take off your jersey, I'll fight you," the assistant captain yelled after pulling at Zachary's shirt to stop him from continuing to the corner flag. "You'll get a red card this time around."

"Oh," Zachary said, smiling sheepishly and cooling down. "But I wasn't going to take off my shirt..." He stopped mid-sentence as the rest of his teammates had arrived and started jumping on them to celebrate the goal.

Chapter 145 - Another Post-Match Interview

FWEEEEEEEE

Emily's eyes sparkled with delight when the referee blew the final whistle, bringing the proceedings on the field to an end.

Inside, she was smiling as a cacophony of clapping, coupled with cries for joy, broke out in the stands of Lerkendal Stadion. In the seats all around her, the Rosenborg fans wore grins of giddy jubilation as they savored their team's sweet, sweet victory.

The Troll Kids had managed to maintain their 2:0 lead against Tromsø Idrettslag, ending the night with three points in the bag. Better yet, it was Zachary, her client, who'd scored the two goals that helped Rosenborg claim the victory. Her spirits soared as she thought about the possible implications of another one of Zachary's incredible performances.

"Your client's set-piece technique is something," Ryan Bellmore, her race car driver friend, intoned from beside her. "I suggest you encourage him to move to White Hart Lane before the other top teams spot him."

"Ryan," Emily said, raising a brow. "I'll be introducing you to him later. Don't mention any needless things, like him moving away from his current team when you meet him."

"No worries," Ryan replied, grinning. "I'll only suggest we go racing for a few days. Nothing more." He added jokingly.

"Ryan!" Emily intoned, giving him a sideways glance.

"Okay, okay," Ryan said, still grinning. "I'm a responsible athlete. No worries. By the way, why not approach automobile and phone companies regarding endorsements. They have better offers than the rest of the companies, especially here in Norway."

"I'll see," Emily replied perfunctorily, not wanting to delve further into the topic.

Another wave of cheering soon washed over the stadium as Zachary and his teammates moved around the field, waving at the fans to show appreciation for their support. The cheers and applause slowly grew to a crescendo until they mingled together into a single sustained roar—that shook the stadium, seemingly almost blowing off the roof. It was pure madness in the stands—not mindless crowd mania, but an intense wave of pure bliss and joy brought on by Rosenborg emerging victorious from a hard-to-win fixture.

The corner of Emily's mouth quirked up as she rose from her seat like the rest of the fans and started clapping to give a standing ovation to the Rosenborg players. She felt at home in the crowd even though she couldn't understand the Norwegian words being chanted by the fans around her. But a few times, her ears managed to pick up the words Zachary Bemba from the noise and chatter around her.

Emily was sure her client's reputation had risen to a higher level after the match that day. She could already picture various brand representatives with endorsement deal offers starting to approach her in droves over the coming weeks. She could smell the money already.

Zachary felt contentment swelling through him as he made his way to the area designated for the press after the final whistle. He'd just gotten word from the coach that he needed to take the post-match interview once more since he was the man of the match. His spirits were flying high. He had managed to score another two goals for Rosenborg, bringing his tally to five goals. Everything felt so surreal to him at that moment since he'd only made his professional debut a week prior.

Zachary found the press people eagerly waiting for him on one side of the pitch. Since he already had experience dealing with them, he remained calm as he approached the cameras. The journalists noticed him while he was still a dozen or so steps away from the area designated for them. With all the haste they could muster, they all began focusing their camera lenses on him, trying to capture his image.

He didn't feel rattled by the attention since he had already experienced the press during his post-match interview on the weekend. He only had to think of the media people as another group of fans in order to escape the pressure of being in front of the cameras.

"Welcome back, Zachary," a TV2 Sporten correspondent said as soon as Zachary stepped before the cameras. "We're glad to have you here once again." He added, smiling.

"Thank you," Zachary replied, smiling back. He recognized the reporter, Olav Brusveen. He was the same one that had interviewed him over the weekend after the Aalesunds FK game.

Olav Brusveen was a perfect example of the archetypal TV personality. He had deep blue eyes and a neatly trimmed dark beard that matched well with his sleek hair combed to one side. Some folks wore a smile, but the guy himself was the smile. Everything about him radiated a soft and understated joy as he shook Zachary's hand, welcoming him to the press area.

"You made a strong start as a team," Olav said, going straight to business as soon as the interview started. "You were on the front foot right from the start. You dictated the tempo and kept Tromsø under pressure throughout the entire duration of the first half. Nevertheless, you couldn't manage to get that early goal and gain any advantage over the boys from the North. But all that changed in the final minutes because of you. You're the man of the match once again. How do you feel, Zachary?"

"Obviously, I feel great," Zachary was quick to reply. "I came into this game with the sole objective to win. I'm glad that I got the opportunity to be the person that provided my team with the edge they needed to take the game. But I can't forget the contributions of my teammates. Both Nicki and Tarik were on fire and worked hard to force those fouls out of the defenders in the final third. The two of them were very brilliant during the game."

"Your two free-kicks," Olav continued, smiling at Zachary. "Could you have hit them any better at all?!"

Zachary beamed on hearing the question. "Obviously, not any better. I tried my best, and they went into the back of the net. Didn't they?"

"Yes, of course, they did," Olav replied. "The two goals were phenomenal to the point that a few people are associating your set-piece technique to that of David Beckham. How big of a compliment is that?"

"Oh!" Zachary replied, trying to organize his words. "That's a really nice compliment. I've always admired the Englishman's set-piece technique. Honestly, I've even been training using some of his videos as tutorials. I'm glad that my work is finally paying off. But there's still a lot of work to do to get to his level."

Chapter 146 - Dead-Ball Specialist Juju

"Those are five goals for you in three matches," Olav Brusveen, the TV2 Sporten correspondent, chipped in to continue the post-match interview. "You seem to be flying. It's quite surprising, especially since it has just been only a week since you made your debut. Zachary, how do you do it?"

"Well, I train a lot," Zachary replied in a flat voice. "I also feel good while I'm on the pitch. So, it's easy for me to convert chances when they come to me during the game."

"Not because you eat well?" Olav probed jokingly.

Zachary smiled on hearing that. "Of course there's that," he said. "Eating well is one of the most important requirements for a professional footballer." He added, his facial expression turning solemn.

"Oh, that's good to know," Olav said, still smiling. "Tonight, Rosenborg took another step towards returning to the top of the table and probably the title. Your team has accumulated 16 points, the same as Strømsgodset Toppfotball. Rosenborg is only in second place because of Strømsgodset's superior goal difference. Are you confident with regards to winning the Trophy this season?"

"The team's atmosphere at the moment feels great," Zachary replied right away. "We're the strongest team in Norway. There's no doubt about that. So, we're confident that we can continue gaining victories until we win both the Cupen and the Tippeligaen this season. Of course, that is if we continue putting up our best."

"Best team in Norway, you say!" Olav said, his eyes glittering as if he'd finally caught something newsworthy. "Not Molde, not Strømsgodset! The Tippeligaen fans may not agree. One team is the champion for last season, while the other has been one of the table leaders ever since the season began."

"Of course, we are the best," Zachary replied, his voice oozing with confidence. "We'll soon surpass Strømsgodset and return to the top of the table. And there's no need to mention Molde. If I recall correctly, they should still be at the bottom of the table with two points from seven matches this season. Isn't that right?"

"Yes, you're right," Olav replied, a Cheshire cat's grin lighting up his face. "They've not won any game ever since the season started. Their two points are from two draws."

"Then, there's no need for comparison," Zachary said seriously, wishing to bring the matter to a close. He'd already felt that the reporter was focusing on non-issues instead of asking about the just-concluded match.

Olav nodded, still beaming. "Thank you, Zachary, for your time," he said, extending his hand. "It was great having you here once again. I hope to see you once again next week."

"Thank you, too, for having me," Zachary replied, taking his hand and concluding the post-match interview. He then exchanged handshakes and a few words with a few other media people before heading to the dressing room.

Since it was long past nine in the night, Zachary quickly cleaned up, had the team dinner, and said his goodbyes to the rest of his teammates before leaving Lerkendal with haste. He took the late bus back to Stjerdalsveien, and by 10:15 PM, he'd already returned to his apartment.

All that was on his mind was getting on with his post-match recovery routine and going to bed. He couldn't allow himself to give in to the exhaustion before he completed his post-match physical conditioning to quicken his recovery. He needed to be ready for the away game against Hønefoss Ballklubb the following Monday.

But no sooner had he entered his living room than a system sounded within his mind.

"DING"

"Congratulations," the AI's apathetic voice soon followed.

"The user has completed a hidden system mission—by remaining consistent and managing to score in three consecutive matches by relying on set pieces. The user has earned 100 Juju points and unlocked a new passive skill: Dead-Ball Specialist Juju, effective immediately."

"The user can view the skill details in the system interface. Does the user wish to view the details right now?"

Zachary paused mid-step for a moment, trying to process the new information. "Dead-Ball Specialist!" He mumbled, mulling over the name of the new skill. "Isn't that similar to the Bend-it like-Beckham Juju?"

"Not at all," the AI replied. "The Dead-Ball Specialist Juju is purely a passive mental skill. On the other hand, the Bend-it like-Beckham Juju is an active skill concerned with accurately controlling the body to initiate postures for taking perfect free-kicks. The two skills are different."

"Oh!" Zachary said, caressing his chin. "I need to see this for myself. Bring up the skill info right away." He added, throwing his gym bag to the side before settling into a sofa.

"DING"

"The skill details have been brought up on the interface."

Zachary nodded to himself before perusing through the skill details on the translucent blue screen that appeared before him.

#1 new message.

New Skill (Passive): Dead-Ball Specialist Juju (100% mastery)

Skill Details

->The user will possess nerves of steel before taking any set piece, whether a penalty, corner-kick, or free-kick. The user will enter a state of extreme focus, undisturbed by any outside interference at that juncture.

->When the user activates the skill, he will gain a brief boost in the spatial-awareness and risk analysis core attributes before taking a set-piece. The two stats will rise to the next small-grading after the user has activated the Dead-Ball Specialist Juju.

NB:

->The user can only use the skill just before set-pieces.

->The skill will always cost the user ten Juju-points to activate for 10 seconds before taking the set-piece.

Hope bloomed inside Zachary after reading through the details of the skill. One of the most challenging requirements for any professional footballer was remaining calm in the midst of game-changing opportunities on the pitch. The pressure, born from intense periods, could easily affect a player and hamper his ability to perform in such moments. For instance, a top-notch player could miss a penalty or a free-kick due to pressure, even when he had been converting every set piece on the training ground. The Dead-Ball Specialist Juju was simply the ideal cheat to help any footballer bypass that kind of pressure.

Zachary was sure he could remain consistent and continue performing at his best on set pieces with such a cheat. His conversion rate of free kicks would significantly increase since he wouldn't face any pressure with such a cheat in his repertoire. Moreover, two of his game-intelligence stats would rise to the S- grade as long as he activated the skill. Zachary looked forward to that, as being in that state even for only ten seconds would give him a glimpse of how top athletes usually viewed the game. That way, he would be able to adjust accordingly and grow his skills to the next level.

Zachary's heart leaped up for joy as he thought about the various advantages of the skill. Nonetheless, he still had one concern.

"System," Zachary mumbled, starting to take off his sneakers. "Will activating the skill have any impact on the development of my other stats or attributes?"

"Negative," the AI replied right away. "Rather than slowing down the user's rate of progress, activating the skill will enable the user to develop the attributes leaning on the mental side much faster than before. The user shouldn't worry."

"That's great then." Zachary smiled after hearing the AI's response. As long as the skill had no adverse side effects, he would gladly use it to win games. He was looking forward to using the Dead-Ball Specialist Juju.

The golden sunlight streamed through Kristin's window in a well-mannered announcement of the rising sun. Kristin's eyes flickered open, and she woke from deep slumber to yet another day that brought with it new hopes and aspirations. The golden rays of the late morning sun shone into her still bleary, sleep-laden eyes, irritating them. She quickly brought up her hands to guard them. She let out a suppressed yawn, her eyes closing once more as she took a few moments to enjoy the brief darkness. The beauty of the fresh new day wasn't tempting enough to goad her out of bed.

She'd slept late the previous night after attending a post-match get-together with some of her friends. Everything about her, from her arms to her feet, still felt heavy. Nevertheless, she reopened her eyes a moment later to steal a glance at the pointless alarm clock, glowing red, on her bedside table. She didn't want to sleep up to midday even though she was still tired.

But on noticing it was just 9:30 AM, she gave in to the temptation of sleep and went under the covers once more. She could afford to sink back into her dreamland for another hour or two since she had nothing scheduled for that Thursday morning.

But circumstances couldn't always go as one wished or wanted. No sooner had Kristin closed her eyes, intending to sink back into slumber, than her phone buzzed and vibrated on her bedside table. She still ignored it for a few seconds, trying her best to condition her mind into sleeping once again. She believed that whoever was calling would give up and wait after a few rings. However, the buzzing soon transitioned into her catchy Taylor Swift's <We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together> ringtone.

Kristin could no longer ignore her phone with that much noise close to her bedside. She stretched out an arm, intending to pick it up while cursing at herself for not putting it into silent mode when she was going to bed the previous night. All that was on her mind was to switch it off immediately and return to doing the needful, which was sleeping off her fatigue. She didn't wish to interrupt her morning beauty sleep just because of a call.

But on taking a peek at her smartphone's glowing screen, her eyes fully flickered open, stirring to full attention within an instant. Her thoughts quickly switched into a very high definition as she forced herself out of bed. Without a moment of delay, she pressed the "accept" button to receive the call.

"Hello, Kristin," A deep and slightly raspy voice said from the other end of the line. "How's your morning? Did I wake you?"

"Good morning, grandpa," Kristin spoke into the phone, making sure to keep her voice steady and devoid of any lingering signs of sleep. "I didn't expect your call today. I woke up earlier but was in the shower."

"Oh, okay," Martin Stein, her grandpa, replied. "No worries. I only wanted to check on you. It has been a long time, probably two months, without you visiting. Did you follow up with the sporting director about the possibility of taking a few months as an intern at the club? I had already mentioned it to him. He'd promised that he would consider you for some of the volunteer positions during the period before you start university."

"Oh, that," Kristin said, walking towards the large window that took up a large section of the wall on one side of her room. "I already met Mr. Erik Hoftun, and he promised that he would bring me on board during summer. If all goes well, I'll be attached to the publicity office."

"Okay, that's great, then," Mr. Stein said. "If you get any challenges there, call me. Although I'm already out of the management, my words still carry some weight at the club."

Kristin's smile faded on hearing that. She took a moment to organize her thoughts as she peered out of the curtains, noticing that there was already a pearly glow in the sky. But a moment later, she closed the curtains once again as the sun outside was too intense for her still bleary eyes.

"Grandpa," she said after a moment. "Did you find out if the new coach was involved?"

For a few seconds, there was silence at the other end of the line. But just as Kristin started getting worried that she'd caused her grandpa to hang up, his voice came through her phone's speaker once again. "Kristin," Mr. Stein said, his tone somber. "I've already confirmed that the new coach isn't one of them. It seems like they didn't get a chance to recruit him because of how fast he switched from being the academy coach to the manager of the senior side."

"Did you find out about the rest of the people involved?" Kristin probed, retracing her steps and sitting back on her bed.

"Yes, I have one suspect," Mr. Stein replied. "But let's not talk about this on the phone. And please don't try to ask the other club employees about this when you meet them. Stay out of this and focus on getting an internship. It'll be good for you if you're ever going to manage an agency in the future. Okay?"

"Yes, grandpa," Kristin replied, her tone humble.

"That's great," Mr. Martin said, his voice seemingly taking on a relaxed state. "If you get some time, come and see me, and I'll tell you all about the issues. Also, try to get that Zachary to visit me when you're coming. It has been a long time since I last saw him. I also need to warn him about such issues."

"Okay, grandpa," Kristin replied. "I'll tell him. How is your health, by the way? Are you feeling better after the surgery?"

"Don't worry," Mr. Stein replied. "I'm getting better with each passing day. Soon, we shall be making trips to the rest of the world like before." He added jokingly.

"That's great," Kristin said, her eyes gleaming with excitement. "But don't push yourself too much. Take it slow, and you'll get well in no time."

"Okay, take care," Mr. Stein said. "But please do go back and visit your family once in a while. They may not understand your dreams, but they still care about you. Okay?"

"Yes, grandpa," Kristin replied perfunctorily. "I'll try."

"That's my granddaughter," Mr. Stein replied excitedly. "I hope you do it soon. Goodbye." He added and ended the call right after.

A troubled smile outlined Kristin's face as she took one final glance at the screen of her iPhone before throwing it onto her bed. She didn't like it in the slightest when her grandpa requested her to visit her folks.

She could talk to her grandpa without any needless worries. After all, he was one of the few people in her family who truly understood her since he also enjoyed sports. Talking to the rest of her family members was another matter. She dreaded the idea of having to face them once again. She couldn't sit together with them in a room without an argument breaking out in a few minutes.

She hoped to avoid them as long as possible since they were set against her dream to be part of the sports industry.

When she was younger, they had continuously discouraged her from getting too involved in any sports. She couldn't remember a single time they'd taken her love for skiing, chess, and football into consideration. They'd always asserted that she needed to study and learn to handle the family businesses rather than wasting her time in fields where she had no talent.

At one time, when she'd stood her ground and insisted on joining some of the professional skiing clubs, they'd used their influence and blocked her from getting a membership. They'd even shipped her off to a boarding school in Switzerland soon after, citing that they needed to correct her rebellious attitude before it was too late. Had it not been for her maternal grandpa, she would have never gotten a chance to get involved in any sports, whether chess or football. She would have remained cooped up somewhere, reading accounting books and other boring stuff.

"Kristin, are you awake yet?" The voice of Monica Rønning, her flatmate, sounded from behind her bedroom door, accompanied by a couple of loud knocks. "Would you like to eat breakfast with me? I've made eggs, veggies, and some cookies."

"Okay," Kristin replied, yelling back. "I will be out in a few minutes. Give me a few minutes to freshen up."

Ten minutes later, Kristin sat opposite her flatmate on their small dining table, feasting on a light breakfast. Their dining room carried a happy vibe interwoven with the aroma of their meal which soothed Kristin to the bone. She felt her thoughts clearing further—all her worries forgotten as she enjoyed her breakfast.

"You didn't go for training today!" She said to her flatmate after finishing her breakfast.

"Day off," Monica Rønning responded, her eyes never leaving her bowl of cereal. "You didn't play the game yesterday?" Her flatmate queried after a while, in-between mouthfuls of cereal.

"I was watching Rosenborg's home game until late," Kristin replied, leaning back in her chair and sipping on her juice. "I came back very exhausted and couldn't concentrate."

"Oh," Monica said, glancing up for the first time to observe Kristin. "You'll fall in the rankings."

"I don't mind," Kristin replied, the corners of her mouth turning up. "I don't want to ascend the chess rankings so quickly. That would attract the attention of my folks even before I can join uni."

"Well, up to you," Monica said. "By the way, have you checked Olav Brusveen's Facebook page today? I mean Olav, the TV2 sports journalist."

"No," Kristin replied, raising a brow. "Why?"

Chapter 148 - Post-Match Interview Video Went Viral II

Monica chuckled, inclining her head to lock eyes with Kristin. "You'll love this," she said. "Olav posted something about what Zachary said during the post-match interview yesterday. Both the Molde and Rosenborg fans have gone crazy over the post on many social media platforms. Check your Facebook."

"You don't say," Kristin smiled, picking up her phone to view the post. She hurriedly navigated to Olav's page, which had over ten thousand followers, all sports lovers from Norway and a few neighboring Scandinavian countries.

"WE ARE THE STRONGEST TEAM IN NORWAY - THERE'S NO DOUBT ABOUT THAT," says Zachary Bemba, Rosenborg's new star. That was the title that greeted Kristin on opening Olav's page. She glanced up from her phone to Monica, wondering why such a statement could send the fans into a frenzy.

Zachary hadn't said anything wrong as Rosenborg had the most glorious history in Norway. Most Norwegians silently agreed that Rosenborg was the best team at the bottom of their hearts. Thus, the reaction of the fans was puzzling.

"Watch the video first," Monica said, seemingly guessing her thoughts. "It's the way he phrased it. You'll understand."

Kristin nodded before fixing her earphones into place and clicking the play button on the Facebook video. The seven-minute well-edited motion picture started by showing the highlights of Zachary's performances in his previous three games. It showed all Zachary's goals, including the bicycle-kick against Aalesunds and his two free-kicks against Tromsø. When the highlights ended, Zachary's stern face populated the whole screen as the post-match interview from the previous day started showing.

"Your team has accumulated 16 points, the same as Strømsgodset Toppfotball," Kristin heard the reporter, probably Olav Brusveen, say. "Rosenborg is only in second place because of Strømsgodset's superior goal difference. Are you confident with regards to winning the Trophy this season?"

"The team's atmosphere at the moment feels great!" Zachary replied. "We're the strongest team in Norway. There's no doubt about that. So, we're confident that we can continue gaining victories until we win both the Cupen and the Tippeligaen this season."

"Best team in Norway, you say!" The voice of the reporter queried, coming to Kristin's ears through the earphones. "Not Molde, not Strømsgodset! The Tippeligaen fans may not agree. One team is the champion for last season, while the other has been one of the table leaders ever since the season began."

"Of course, we are the best," Zachary replied confidently. "We'll soon surpass Strømsgodset and return to the top of the table. And there's no need to mention Molde. If I recall correctly, they should still be at the bottom of the table with two points from seven matches this season. Isn't that right?"

"Yes, you're right," Olav replied. "They've not won any game ever since the season started. Their two points are from two draws."

"Then, there's no need for comparison," Zachary said seriously, and the interview section of the video ended.

Olav Brusveen's elegant face appeared on her phone screen next.

"There you have it," the TV2 Sporten reporter said. "That was the post-match interview from yesterday's Rosenborg's game with Zachary Bemba. The new star of Rosenborg is very confident that Rosenborg will continue racking up more victories to win the double this season. All the other teams need to watch out as this is one player that means what he says. His goals speak for themselves. Thank you for watching. If you liked the video, please like our page, and please do comment to make your opinions known." Olav said in a conclusive tone, ending the seven-minute video.

Kristin chuckled after she finished watching the video. "This guy seriously needs a publicity secretary or something," she said, shaking her head. "How can you say that there's no need for comparison just because Molde is at the bottom of the table. The Molde fans will eat him alive when they chance upon him." She added, scrolling on to the comments below the video.

A lot of people had already commented on the video. Kristin could only read the comments with the most likes just below the video.

Rolf Petersen's comment with 614 likes: 'I'm a Viking FK supporter, and I usually don't like to get into the rivalry between Rosenborg and Molde. But I have to intervene this time around. Saying there's no need for comparison between Molde and Rosenborg is outright nonsense. Molde are the champions for last season. They also eliminated Rosenborg at the Fourth Round stage of the Cupen last year. Where does this young boy get the confidence to say that Molde can't compare to Rosenborg? Is it just because he has scored a few goals for Rosenborg?'

Sindre Hestad's comment with 613 likes: 'Who cares about what he said. If any Molde player can score a goal similar to his bicycle-kick against Aalesunds, he'll get a free pass. He can say anything he wishes to say during the post-match interview, and we'll spend the whole morning commenting about it. Oops! I just forgot that Molde lacks any star players who can attract this kind of attention. My bad. Sorry about that.'

Svein Hagen's comment with 506 likes: ROSENBORG! ROSENBORG! ROSENBORG!

Jarl Lunde's comment with 503 likes: '@Sindre_Hestad @Svein_Hagen; your comments lack any substance. Let's wait for Monday 20th. We shall solve this at Lerkendal. Don't forget last season's lesson and no need for pointless arguments.'

RonaldinholsFromAkerStadium's comment with 492 likes: 'Well said @Rolf_Petersen and @Jarl_Lunde. We Molde fans don't need to argue over pointless stuff. When we come to Lerkendal Stadion on May 20th, we shall show you who the boss is.'

Kristin continued browsing through the comments and noticed that majority supported Zachary's statement of Rosenborg being the best in Norway. However, there were also a large number of fans that were dissing him and promising him hell when he faced Molde later that May. She browsed a few other sports pages and noticed that they were all discussing the same topic of Zachary, his goals, and his post-match interview. Zachary had become a sensation in both the wrong and good ways. Kristin was both surprised and amused.

"Do you think that Zachary has seen that video?" Monica inquired after noticing that Kristin had finished watching.

"I highly doubt that," Kristin replied, her eyes still on her phone's screen. "I remember him saying something about not being on Facebook or Twitter. He must still be in the dark about this. But there's nothing wrong with what Zachary said in the video. It's good publicity for both him and Rosenborg."

"Let me correct you there," Monica said, smiling. "It's good publicity only if he can make his claims come true by continuing to perform well and helping his team to gain more victories. Should he lose against Molde or Strømsgodset—and then fail to win any trophy, he will become the biggest joke in the Tippeligaen this season."

Zachary felt the difference when he was on the bus to meet Emily and her race car driver friend the morning after the match. People were doing that thing where he would glance their way, and they would pretend they hadn't been looking at him. When he would look away and focus on the passing scenery outside the bus window, he would again feel their gazes locked on him. The situation within the bus remained awkward for a while until one brave blonde-haired kid, probably an 11 to 13 years-old-male, walked up to his seat and tapped his arm.

"Hello, Mister," the kid said, looking up at his face with puppy eyes.

"Yes, hello, young man," Zachary replied, inclining his head slightly and flashing the kid a toothy grin. He could see that the kid was fidgeting and didn't want to frighten him. "How may I help you?" He asked, making sure to keep his voice as soft and gentle as possible.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, mister," the kid said, shifting his weight from one leg to the other while glancing at the floor. "But may I ask if you're Zachary Bemba, the Rosenberg number-33? You do look a lot like him?"

"Oh, that's me," Zachary responded, surprised for a moment that the kid had recognized him. A large part of his face was—covered by the hood of his jacket and his cap's visor. He hadn't expected that anyone would be able to guess his identity.

"Great," the kid said, clapping his hands excitedly. "I told my friends back there that it was you. But, they all argued that it couldn't be you, claiming that there was not a chance for a Rosenberg player to be on the same bus as us. We're all huge fans of yours and Rosenberg. It's nice to meet you in person." The kid intoned words at the pace of a machine gun, grinning from ear to ear.

"Nice to meet you, too," Zachary replied, patting the kid's shoulder. "I'm glad that you're a Rosenberg fan. What's your name, by the way?"

"Josh," the kid replied. "Joshua Simonsen"

"Oh, nice to meet you, Josh," Zachary said. "Do you play football?"

"Yes, I do," Josh was quick to reply. "I'm one of the under-13s at the NF Academy. Everyone there regards you as an idol. They'll die of envy if I tell them that I met you on the bus."

"Oh!" Zachary said, at a loss for words. "That's great," he added, only trying to keep the conversation flowing. He had just realized that talking to a fan was not an easy task. Too many compliments could creep out anyone, even the bravest of celebrities.

"Zachary," Josh said after a while. "Is it possible to get your autograph?" He asked, his voice taking on an imploring but formal tone.

"Yes, of course," Zachary replied, wishing to quickly sign for the boy and send him back to his seat. "Where can I sign for you?"

"Thank you, here is the marker," Josh said, grinning. He then removed his jacket and turned around. "You can sign on my shirt." He added, pointing a finger towards his back.

A wry smile outlined Zachary's face on seeing that the boy wanted the autograph on his well-ironed white shirt. At that moment, he couldn't help but recall the times when his grandma had pulled his ears because he had dirtied his school uniform. Although the kid in front of him wasn't in uniform, Zachary was still hesitant to mess up the kid's neat attire.

"Don't you have something like a notebook where I could sign for you?" He asked. "Your mom may not like it when you go back home with a shirt stained with ink."

"No worries," Josh said, without turning back. "My mom won't even notice. I have many shirts. Moreover, notebooks don't last. An autograph on a shirt is way better."

"Oh!" Zachary said, caressing his chin. "Then we don't need to stain your shirt with marker ink. I've got one of my Rosenborg jerseys in my gym bag. I'll sign my name on it and give it to you. How's that for a solution? Isn't that better than staining your shirt?"

"Wow," Josh said, finally turning around and facing Zachary once again. "You're giving me a signed jersey? Is it a number-33?" He asked, his voice rising to the point of attracting a few more curious gazes from the other passengers on the bus.

"No need to be loud," Zachary said, maintaining a smile. "It's a number-33 jersey, the only one I have at the moment. Well, what say you? You better decide fast coz I'm almost reaching my destination."

"Of course, I want it," Josh said, his blue eyes glittering with pure excitement. "Thank you, Zachary. My teammates at the academy are going to be super jealous."

"Okay, then I'll get the jersey," he said, picking up his gym bag from beside him. He then fished out his only number-33 jersey, carefully wrote a few encouraging words to Josh, and finally signed his name.

"Here you go," he said, folding and handing the signed jersey to Josh. He'd just realized that he had finally started acting as a role model to younger players in his former academy. He was feeling good on the inside.

Josh carefully received the jersey and unfolded it before giving it a once over. He then flashed Zachary a grin, saying, "Thanks a lot, thanks a lot..." He mumbled several thank-yous agitatedly. The boy seemed genuinely happy, and Zachary could have sworn that he'd seen a tear or two at the corner of his eyes.

"Keep working hard in the academy," Zachary said, patting the boy's shoulder once again. "You'll be playing for Rosenborg in no time if you stay true to your football."

"Thank you," Josh said, his eyes still on the jersey. "I'll treasure your words." He then folded the jersey as if it was his most prized possession in the world before returning to his seat.

Zachary let out a pent-up breath of air as soon as the kid departed. Dealing with emotional youngsters that were also passionate fans was not a part of his set of skills. But he had to put in the effort since the kid loved football. Maybe, his words could help the boy mature into a highly skilled footballer in the future. That was his intention. As his grandma had often said: "A good deed would never be lost in time. The person who sowed courtesy by doing good always reaped friendship, while the one who planted kindness would gather love." Zachary was glad that he'd sown another portion of good karma in his new life. Maybe, he would see the benefits soon.

A soft smile lit up his face as he leaned back in his seat to enjoy the rest of his bus ride to the town square. He only had to meet with Emily and her race car driver friend that day and had nothing else planned. But surprisingly, he felt relaxed and thankful for a day off from his hectic schedule. He'd finally

learned to treasure his off-days after having played three intense matches within a span of a week. Had it been a month back, he would have still been on the field or in the gym training even on such days.

He was about to pull on his headsets to enjoy some music for the rest of the short journey to Trondheim Square. But to his dismay, a few more fans began appearing beside his seat, asking for his autograph in a systematic manner. He couldn't help but wonder how his fame had exploded within a single night to the point of attracting fans even when he was on a bus. He understood that it took time for any player to build a reputation among the fans. Although he was in Trondheim, the home city of Rosenborg, the fans shouldn't have easily recognized who he was since he'd only played three games for his club. Zachary was in a state of confusion as he signed his name on several notebooks of passionate Rosenborg fans, both young and old—until he reached his destination.

Chapter 150 - A Meeting With Emily And Ryan

When Zachary alighted from the bus, he pulled the visor of his cap further down to hide his face. He didn't want to be held down by any other passionate Rosenborg fans that wanted an autograph from him.

He cast a glance at his watch and noticed that it was 10:16 AM, only 14 minutes to the scheduled time of his meeting with Emily. So, without further ado, he quickly began making his way towards Trondheim Square, where he was supposed to be meeting Emily and her friend.

As he walked down the street under the morning sun that warmed his skin, he felt that the day was postcard perfect. Pedestrians walked like shoals of fish in myriad directions, not a single one of them in heavy clothing. Zachary smiled as he took in the sights around him. He liked the Trondheim with the warmer days better.

A few minutes later, he made it to the cafe close to Trondheim Square, where he usually held meetings with Emily. But to his surprise, Emily was yet to arrive. So, he settled down in one of the seats of a corner table and ordered some cherry juice as he waited for his agent to arrive.

But he didn't have to wait long. Emily arrived together with her friend shortly after. Zachary did a double-take on seeing the man beside him.

He was the typical Brad Pitt look-alike with a perfect square jaw, blue eyes, and Achilles-golden hair coiffed to perfection. He could have been the ideal male model with his androgynous looks that could easily dazzle the fairer sex. But he had one shortcoming. He was short, probably 5-feet-three, by Zachary's estimation. The man's height betrayed his exquisite appearance.

"Sorry we're late," Emily said as soon as the two of them arrived at Zachary's table. "We got caught in traffic."

"No worries," Zachary replied, standing up and extending his hand for a greeting. "It's only a few minutes. So, I don't really mind."

"That's great," Emily said, taking his hand. "How is your morning?" She inquired.

"Slow," Zachary replied, smiling at her. "I have the day off today. So, a bit bored."

"Then let's help you solve that boredom," Emily said, turning to the short man beside her. "This one here is the friend I previously mentioned. He's Ryan Bellmore, a race car driver. He spends quite a lot of time in Norway."

"Nice to meet you," Ryan Bellmore chipped in, extending his hand for a greeting.

"Nice to meet you, too," Zachary replied, taking his hand. "I'm Zachary Bemba."

"Oh, I know who you're," Ryan said, a sunny smile outlining his face. "There's no need for introductions. I watched your match yesterday and that viral post-match interview video of yours this morning. You're something."

"Viral post-match video!?" Zachary probed, settling back into the comfort of his seat.

"Yes, your post-interview video that's making headlines around Norway," Ryan said, settling beside Emily in a seat opposite Zachary's.

Zachary's eyes went round on hearing the short guy's response. He inclined his head and searched Emily's face for confirmation while wondering when post-match videos had become so popular to the point of going viral in Norway.

"Oh, gosh, Zachary!" Emily exclaimed, seemingly noticing his surprise and incomprehension. "Don't tell me you haven't watched it!" She probed, holding Zachary's gaze.

"Nope," Zachary replied, shaking his head. "This is the first time I'm hearing about the post-match video going viral. It was just another pointless interview where the journalist asked me a few questions about my club and its aspirations. I didn't even expect it to make any news since I found it boring."

Ryan and Emily laughed at that, shaking their heads as if their ears had picked up the world's funniest joke.

"Here, go ahead and watch it," Emily said, holding out her phone to Zachary from across the table. "Tell me how off-handedly dismissing one of Norway's most flourishing teams can fail to make the news. You've got to learn that the press loves chaos. If you say anything controversial, they'll capitalize on it because that's what makes good headlines. Your post-match interview was exactly that."

"Oh, but that wasn't my intention," Zachary said, receiving the phone from Emily's outstretched hand. He then started watching the post-match video on Emily's phone.

After watching for a few minutes, he realized that the reporter had omitted some of his statements to make him look more domineering in the video. For instance, he'd only said that he was sure that Rosenborg could continue racking up wins as long as he and his teammates could continue doing their best. But Olav, the reporter, had neglected the "as long as we continue putting up our best" part. Olav made it look like Zachary didn't put the rest of the Tippeligaen teams in his eyes. For the first time in his career, he realized that journalists were sly foxes, especially when setting people up. The way Olav had edited the video to show his highlights, then seamlessly fixed his statements close to the end, was ingenious. It showed that he was one crafty guy—fully intent on pitting him against the Molde and Strømsgodset fans.

"Do you understand now?" Emily queried on noticing that Zachary had finished watching the video.

"Yes, I do," Zachary replied, handing the phone back to her. "The guy who edited the video was a pro. That explains the incident on the bus when I was on my way here."

"What incident?" Emily queried, narrowing her eyes.

"Well, it's something small and not so serious," Zachary replied. He then went on to tell them about how he spent most of the time on his bus ride to town signing autographs for a few Rosenborg's passionate fans.

Emily chuckled after listening to his account. "Then this video is good for us," she said. "The more your fame increases in Norway and among the Rosenborg fans, the better our situation will be. We'll be able to get juicier endorsement deals if there's nothing controversial about your reputation."

"Maybe," Zachary replied, smiling back at her. "But I still don't get why this went viral. What I said in the interview is already known to every Tippeligaen fan. Rosenborg is the best team in Norway. Just think about it this way: would the Dutch fans have any reaction if a player was to say that Ajax Amsterdam was the best team in the Eredivisie? I don't get why the fans here are overreacting!"

"Well, they would have ignored it if it was any other time of the season," Ryan chipped in, mopping a hand through his golden hair as if to straighten it further. "However, it's only eleven days remaining to the most heated fixture of the season. That's one of the games between Rosenborg and Molde. At the moment, the Molde fans are sensitive to anything said about their team by any Rosenborg player. They are even more jittery because their team has been performing poorly since the start of the season. That was why your statements irked them so much that they've taken to social media to defend their team. So, get ready to face the music and the booing when your team goes against Molde. The Molde fans have already marked you as an outlet for their dissatisfaction."

Zachary smiled. "I'm not afraid of them, not even their team," he said, shaking his head. "Not the way they are playing this season."

Ryan laughed at that. "You know they've got that guy, Ole Gunnar Solskjaer, as their coach," he said, caressing his spade-shaped goatee. "The guy has got an uncanny way of raising his team's morale and performance, especially when there are big matches. I don't know how he does it. You need to watch out."

"No worries," Zachary said. "I'll let the coaches worry about defeating him. Don't you guys want to order anything, by the way?" He asked, sweeping his gaze across both Emily and Ryan.

"Nope," Emily was the first to reply. "Let's not waste time and get right to business. Ryan!" She added, turning to look at the short man beside her.

Ryan cleared his throat and smiled. "So, Emily tells me that you need to buy a good car right away," he said, inclining his head slightly to observe Zachary's face.

"Yes, I would like to buy one," Zachary replied, nodding. "Emily convinced me last night that you're the go-to man when one needs to buy a good machine. But I still feel guilty for taking up your time. Are you sure that this won't affect your schedule! As a race car driver, you must be really busy."

"Not at all," Ryan replied, his smile stretching further into a grin. "Emily must have already mentioned that shopping for cars is one of my hobbies. Moreover, what she forgot to mention is that I'm also a part-time dealer. I'm what you call a middleman when buying things."

"Middleman!" Zachary probed, raising a brow and turning toward Emily for confirmation. The latter nodded, validating the statement.

"Yes, a middle man," Ryan continued. "When I'm not on the racing tracks, I work as an intermediary of sorts. I help people buy things. Whether it is housing, cars, art—I can find them all as long as they are within Europe. So, if you ever need to buy anything in the future, you can always find me. I'll always be able to help you. That's on commission, of course."

"Oh, now that makes sense since you're a middleman," Zachary said, nodding. "I'm now at ease. But how do you balance racing with being a middle man? As far as I know, every sport is quite demanding, especially with regards to time."

"Yeah, it's hard balancing the two," Ryan replied, shaking his head. "But I have to since I've got to raise money for my dream, which is racing. Finding organizations interested in motorsport sponsoring is becoming increasingly difficult. Last year, I had to fund myself through four of the races. Had I not made some good money on the side through my intermediary business, I would have gone broke to the point of even sleeping on the streets. Anyways, that aside, if you need my help this time around, I'm ready to help."

"Okay, I think I'll need your help on this," Zachary said, smiling. "But what's your commission?"

"We're offering 1000 Norwegian Kroner for this," Emily chipped in before Ryan could reply. "Since it's the first meeting, you shouldn't have even charged Zachary for your help."

"A man got to eat, but that'll do," Ryan replied, a sheepish smile outlining his face. "Zachary, which kind of vehicle do you need? A sporty one or a sleek one? Do you have any preference for any manufacturers? And what's your budget?"