

Greatest 171

Chapter 171 - The Perfect Start I

As usual, Kristin was present for the match in the stands of Lerkendal together with her flatmate. She jumped up from her seat and started cheering with the rest of the fans when Nicki Nielsen, the highly clinical Rosenborg number-9, put the ball into the back of the net.

"It is only the fourth minute, and Rosenborg is already ahead by one goal," she heard Kjell Roar, the commentator, say. His mellifluous voice boomed through the stadium's loudspeakers, dwarfing the loud cheering of the Rosenborg fans in the stadium.

"Thanks to the quick thinking of Zachary and Nicki, the Rosenborg players have themselves a perfect start in this highly contested Tippeligaen fixture," the commentator continued as the cheering started to die down. "What incredible stuff from the Rosenborg number-33, Zachary Bemba. The vision and composure to spot that possibility and take the free-kick quickly while the Molde players were still sleeping was simply genius. I'm at a loss for words regarding the ingenuity of this 18-year-old player."

"No, you aren't," Kristin heard the voice of Harald Brattbakk, the pundit for the day, chipping in. "If you're at a loss for words, then what about the Molde fans or even Coach Ole Gunnar Solskjaer himself? One look at him on the visitor's bench, and you'll understand what it means to be at a loss for words."

Kjell Roar laughed at that. "I wouldn't blame the coach, though," he said, his voice lowering. "Conceding that goal was without a doubt the fault of all Molde players. Why on earth is it that none of them kept an eye on Zachary when he picked up the ball? Instead, they kept arguing with the referee and didn't even bother to mark Rosenborg's two most dangerous players. I'm really perplexed."

"Why do you sound like a Molde fan?" Harald, the Rosenborg legend and pundit for the day, queried.

"No, I'm not," Kjell Roar was quick to reply. "It's just that it has been a long time ever since I witnessed such a goal. For a moment there, I thought the referee would cancel it since he hadn't yet arranged the wall when Zachary took that lightning-fast free-kick."

"That must be the thought running through the heads of all the Molde fans watching the game both live in the stadium and back at home on their screens," Harald cut in. "But, let me assure you: the goal is a hundred percent legit. Zachary managed to make that assist without breaking any of the rules of the game."

"Think about it for a moment," the pundit continued. "Zachary just took advantage of the situation and delivered the ball to Nicki when the Molde players were still sleeping. He didn't commit any punishable offense, such as a foul, during the entire process."

"Nicki, who was clearly onside, took the opportunity and did what he does best. He put the ball in the back of the net without any pressure. So, remind me why the referee should cancel the goal."

Kristin heard Kjell Roar chuckle at that. "Tell that to the Molde players," he said. "They're all over the referee, still arguing against the quickly taken free-kick. But the referee is still standing firm regarding his decision."

"Let's talk about Zachary for a bit as we wait for the match officials to solve the chaos on the field," Kjell Roar said, his voice steadily growing spirited. "Over the past few days, he was quite outspoken regarding what he thought about Molde. And today, he has backed his words with actions by providing that assist in the fourth minute. What do you think about this, Harald?"

Harald chuckled. "I watched Zachary's two post-match interviews," the pundit replied. "And as you said, Zachary was quite outspoken regarding Molde. I understand that some might think that he was a bit arrogant in the interviews, but I have a different opinion. Have you considered that he might not be that self-important but outright confident?"

"Look at the game today," the pundit continued, without giving Kjell a chance to answer the question. "He stated that there was no way Molde would defeat Rosenborg considering their past fixtures, especially at Lerkendal. In the fourth minute, Molde has already made a mistake and conceded a goal. And that goal was in part created by him. So, tell me: is he arrogant or confident?"

"Well," Kjell Roar said. "The game has just started, and we'll have the answer to that question at the end of the 90 minutes. For now, let's take you back to the live-action. The game has just restarted with Molde's kick-off. However, the players in blue still seem rattled. They haven't managed to settle down into the game after conceding the early goal. Their passing and positioning are messy beyond measure, and they're finding it hard to hold possession. Is this really Molde, the reigning Tippeligaen champion and the team coached by one of the Norwegian legends of the game?"

Kristin returned her full attention to the pitch after the cheering died down. She watched as Molde tried to hold on to the possession, passing the ball through the middle with quick one-touch and two-touch

passes. For the next few minutes, they gave the impression that they were trying their best to settle into the game and dictate the tempo.

But the Rosenborg players didn't let them. The troll kids had taken the counter-pressing strategy to the extreme. They ran at any Molde player with the ball as if their lives were on the line, trying their best to win back possession as quickly as possible. They didn't allow the players in blue any second to settle down with the ball. Thanks to that, they managed to force the Molde defensive midfielders to play the ball high towards the other side of the field.

Hope fluttered inside Kristin's as she watched Mike Jensen, one of Rosenborg's double-pivots, control the ball while skipping past a Molde player. Without wasting time, he kicked it towards Zachary, who'd already opened himself up beyond the zone of intense rival pressure in the center circle.

But just as Zachary was about to receive the pass, Jo Inge Berget, the Molde attacking midfielder, was instantly upon him. He collided aggressively into Zachary's back, trying to win the ball back for his team.

Kristin winced despite herself as she thought Zachary might lose possession soon due to the pressure from Jo Inge. But she was once again surprised after a moment.

Zachary received the pass beautifully with a simple deft touch, while managing to hold off the bearded Jo Inge with his incredible physique. He then faked a pass down the field before spinning around and initiating an exquisite Cruyff-turn that threw off the midfielder, leaving him disoriented and ignorant of what had happened.

Chapter 172 - The Perfect Start II

"What flamboyant skills we've just seen from Zachary Bemba!" Kristin heard Kjell Roar yelling out loud, his mellifluous voice dwarfing the excited cheering of the fans around her. "Absolutely incredible with that beautiful Cruyff-turn. Dazzling stuff from the 18-year Rosenborg number-33. He has managed to lose Jo Inge Berget, the Molde attacking midfielder, and has now gotten himself some space to work with the ball."

Kristin's hopes kindled as she watched the goings-on on the pitch. She saw Zachary lift his head for a moment and sweep a brief gaze across the field. Using the outside of his boot, he let loose a raking through-pass towards Nicki Nielsen in Molde's defensive third. The cheering of the Rosenborg fans in the stadium grew to another level after Zachary's creative display.

"Once again, Zachary has managed to catch the Molde defense sleeping with a wonderful lofted pass over the midfield," Kristin heard Kjell Roar holler out loud. "Nicki Nielsen has latched on to Zachary's defense-splitting pass. He chests the ball to the ground and ruffles a first-time shot towards the goal."

"Oh, my God! ?rjan Nyland, the Molde goalkeeper, has managed to get his fingertips onto the ball, deflecting it slightly from its intended course. Nicki's shot smashes off the right post before slipping out of play for a corner. What a chance. In the 14th minute, just ten minutes since scoring, Nicki and Zachary have broken apart Molde's defense once more. But this time around, the keeper has come to the rescue, keeping Molde in the game."

"That was some incredible chemistry from Nicki and Zachary once again," Harald, the pundit for the day, chipped in. "It is the second time the two have linked up to create something out of nothing for Rosenborg. Coach Ole Gunnar Solskjaer and his boys will face a lot of problems today if they don't find some way to keep those two in check."

"Exactly my thoughts," Kjell Roar cut in. "And, let's not forget about Zachary's individual brilliance today. The way he created that yard of space for himself by skipping past Jo Inge Berget was out of this world."

"Well," Harald said. "Zachary has been phenomenal in these first fourteen minutes. He's playing with a lot of energy in this game. It seems the bench did him some good. Let's hope he keeps up his incredible performance throughout the entire 90 minutes."

"Molde would be in trouble if he maintained such flamboyance throughout the game," Kjell Roar said. "Coach Ole Gunnar Solskjaer has got a lot of work to do if he wishes to pick up at least a point from this fixture. Let's hope that he can produce the kind of brilliance he had way back when he was still a player at Manchester."

"Playing and coaching are two different things," Harald commented in a flat voice. "Unless Ole, himself, enters the field of play and marks Zachary Bemba, I don't see much hope for Molde."

Kjell Roar chuckled at that. "I would love to see such a match up," he said. "But for now, let's take you back to the action. Jonas Svensson, one of Rosenborg's two defensive midfielders, has just floated a teasing ball into the crowded box."

"There is some pushing and pulling among the players, but the referee doesn't blow the whistle. Oh, my! Tore Reginiussen, the Rosenborg captain, has out-jumped his mark and unleashed a header towards the goal from around the penalty spot. The keeper punches the ball away from his goal—towards the outside of the box."

"Oh, my goodness me! The ball has in some way moved right towards Zachary, positioned at the edge of the box. He meets it with a first-time volley and unleashes a rocket of a shot towards Molde's goal."

"Ouch! Ouch! Ouch. The heavy missile from Zachary collides with Magnus Wolff Eikrem, Molde's defensive midfielder, before flashing past the left goalpost by mere centimeters. The referee points to the corner flag immediately. What intensity from Rosenborg. And what power behind the shot from Zachary. Magnus has just gone to the ground, writhing in pain."

"That may be another blow to Coach Ole Gunnar Solskjaer and his players," Harald chipped in. "From Magnus' expression, you can see that he's in a lot of pain. The ball hit him on the lower thigh, possibly causing a quadriceps contusion. He may not be able to continue."

"In the meantime, Coach Ole Gunnar Solskjaer has called the rest of his players to the touchline," Kjell Roar said. "It seems he wants to straighten his team's attitude right away. Let's wish him some luck because we don't want this game to be one-sided. That would be too boring."

"Jo Inge," Coach Ole Gunnar Solskjaer said, his brows drawing together into a frown. "You're the very person that suggested that you would mark Zachary. But what's happening on the field? The boy has been creating problems for us without facing any pressure. So, Jo, what are you doing? Should I give the task to someone else?"

"No, coach," Jo Inge was quick to reply, shaking his head. "I'll be able to mark him. He just caught me off guard in the first few minutes. But that won't happen again."

"It better not happen another time," Coach Ole Gunnar Solskjaer said, his forehead furrowed. "And the rest of you: what exactly are you doing on the pitch? Why can't you settle down and play football? Your playing is sh*t. Your passing is messy. You haven't even managed to counter-press to win back possession. Are you really professional players?" He swept his gaze across his players right outside the technical area.

"My advice to you is simple," the coach continued after a moment. "Play simple football. Keep passing, and don't panic when Rosenborg uses counter-pressing tactics against us. Just take it as if you're in a rondo and look for a way to keep the ball moving. Play as a team and run back to defend whenever Rosenborg gets possession. Only Daniel Chima should stay up front to keep the Rosenborg defenders on tenterhooks while others remain on defense. If you follow that simple advice, I can assure you, lads, that Rosenborg will find it quite hard to score another goal against us. Are we clear?"

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

"Then head back into the pitch and do your best," Coach Ole Gunnar Solskjaer said, waving them away with a dismissive hand gesture. "Play like reigning champions, and do not disappoint me."

Chapter 173 - An Irksome Opponent

Zachary felt a little guilt coursing through him when he watched the medical personnel help Magnus Wolff Eikrem, one of Molde's defensive midfielders, off the pitch. He hadn't meant for anyone to get injured when he'd unleashed that shot towards the goal. He was only trying to score when he'd caught the Molde defensive midfielder in the middle.

Even though Magnus was an opponent, he couldn't help but feel a bit conflicted as he knew first-hand what an injury meant for a professional football player. That was thanks to the experience he'd accumulated as an injury-prone player during his previous life.

Be that as it may, he also understood that football was the sort of game that came with the usually unavoidable risk of injury. When he gave it his all to win, whether when shooting, tackling, or even faking a foul, he would end up hurting another player at one point. That case was no different. So, he forced himself to push the negative thoughts to the back of his mind—and focused on Jonas Svensson, the Rosenborg defensive midfielder, who was about to take the corner.

Together with the rest of his teammates, he'd gone through several repetitions of practicing various corner drills over the previous week. They'd even rehearsed the hand signals for each kind of corner kick in preparation for the Molde game. So, when Zachary saw Jonas Svensson raise an arm as the signal preceding the corner, he instantly became aware of what type of corner was incoming.

Without any dilly-dallying, he immediately feigned going left before going right—and then pushed through the crowded group of players in the box to welcome the corner. He managed to lose Jo Inge Berget, the player marking him for the day, before jumping to meet the incoming corner ball close to the far post.

But just as he angled his body to plant a header towards the goal, he felt a tug on his shirt, and his upward momentum instantly diminished—almost to zero. He tried to shrug off the player holding his shirt by flailing his arms around, but all his efforts were fruitless. The person holding his shirt didn't relent in the slightest and kept dragging him back towards the ground.

So, he watched helplessly as the ball flashed by him, missing his head by mere centimeters. He could only quiver with indignation, sighing at the missed chance, as his body descended and landed back on the green. Had it not been for that tug, he would have, without a doubt, connected with the corner kick and made an attempt at goal.

Eyes blazing with fury, he locked his intense gaze on Jo Inge Berget, the Molde midfielder that'd just pulled his shirt to deny him from connecting with the ball. To his astonishment, the player had the gull to smile or smirk at him instead of mouthing an apology. It seemed he was trying to provoke Zachary on purpose by gloating over the foul. To make matters worse, the referee didn't notice the foul and just blew the whistle, motioning for the Molde goalkeeper to take the goal kick.

But since Zachary had had a good game since the start of the match, he was still in a jolly mood and didn't let the Molde midfielder's antics spark his rage. So, he sighed, shaking his head slightly before shoving Jo Inge out of the way and moving towards the referee.

"Ref," he intoned once he intercepted the referee close to the center circle. "There was a tug on my shirt by that Jo Inge when I was jumping to head the ball. That was why I missed the ball. Surely, that should have been a foul."

The referee smiled. "I'm watching," he said, without halting his movement across the pitch. "So, don't worry and focus on the game. Just leave the refereeing to me, young man."

Zachary sighed with resignation as he halted in the center circle and turned around to prepare to receive Molde's goal kick. At that moment, he so wished that FIFA would introduce the video assistant referees (VARs) sooner. Had a VAR been present, he was one hundred percent sure he would have won a penalty after the onfield check. Even Jo Inge, the player that'd pulled his shirt, wouldn't have received a yellow or red card after the review.

But as much as he wished for the quick introduction of the VARs, he knew well that they would only come into being in 2017—according to his previous life's memories. That was unless he did nothing to quicken the process of their inception. He forced the thought to the back of his mind before returning his entire focus to the match.

Ørjan Nyland, the Molde goalkeeper, took the goal kick after wasting a few seconds. He kicked the ball with all his power, delivering it high over the midfield—into the defensive third of Rosenborg.

Mike Jensen, one of Rosenborg's defensive midfielders, was ready for the ball. He tracked after it just as it started its descent. He got to it first and outjumped Daniel Chima Chukwu, Molde's center forward, to head it back towards the center of the field.

In an instant, Zachary estimated that the ball would land near him, probably a meter away, with his A-graded spatial awareness.

Like the wind, he took a step to the side and superimposed himself on its course in mere seconds before any other player could react.

While keeping his eyes locked on the ball, he then pushed off the ground, intending to jump high and bring it under control with his chest. But just as he'd started rising, he felt another tug on his shirt.

The person pulling his shirt was so relentless and shameless that he managed to cut short his leap, making him miss the ball by mere inches. Moreover, it was the same player, Jo Inge Berget, that'd just fouled him for the second time. And yet, the referee had similarly not blown his whistle that time around.

Zachary tried his best to keep his frustration in check as he raised his arms in a silent complaint.

But the referee just ignored him and waved for play to continue, without even trying to listen to his grievances. Zachary could feel a wave of intense anger pulsing through his veins and threatening to spill out of his entire being.

But he was well aware that the match had just begun—and better yet, his team was still in the lead. So, he took a deep breath and forced himself to calm down before chasing after the ball, which was already back in possession of one of the Molde defenders. He couldn't let his anger blind him to the point of making him incur a yellow card caution, or even a red, due to an argument.

"You are stronger than I expected," Jo Inge Berget said, grinning after he'd matched his step as they jogged across the pitch towards the ball. "But mark my words: since I'm staying with you throughout the entire duration of the match, you won't get another chance to do anything remarkable in this game. I'm sure about that."

"Oh," Zachary said, his gaze never leaving the direction of the ball. "Then let's wait and see. Hope you don't regret your words." He added before increasing his speed and leaving the midfielder behind. He'd already decided to fight his opponents using the ball instead of verbal insults or punches. So, he remained deaf to Jo Inge's provocations.

Chapter 174 - A Magical Moment

Coach Johansen's smile faded, his brows snapping together into a frown when he saw Jo Inge, the Rosenborg midfielder, foul Zachary once again. The two players had been at each other's necks, trying to outmuscle and outmaneuver one another since the 15th minute of the game. The two of them had turned the game into a physical battle of fouling and pitting body-against-body as they fought for dominance in the midfield. But most times, it was Jo Inge doing the fouling while Zachary was on the receiving end.

Jo Inge's fouling was so skillful and stealthy that he managed to get away with fouls more times than he did not. He would only pull on Zachary's shirt or kick his calf when the referee's eyes were elsewhere. Thanks to that, he hadn't even incurred a yellow card—even after playing a rough dirty game for more than 40 minutes.

Coach Johansen felt a flash of irritation compounded by a pang of distress coursing through him as he continued following the proceedings on the field of play. He'd already noticed that Zachary was beginning to become uncomfortable due to the constant harassment from the Molde man.

The African prodigy was no longer unleashing his signature defense-splitting passes, and Rosenborg's dominance in the middle was slowly slipping away. Even worse, his touches on the ball had continued to reduce steadily as the match progressed. The situation on the pitch had already started to worry the

coach even though his team was still leading 1:0 against Coach Ole Gunnar Solskjaer's side in the 43rd minute.

"I think it's quite easy to solve Zachary's predicament without even making a substitution," Trond Henriksen, his assistant, commented from beside him.

"Oh," Coach Johansen said. "What is your suggestion, then?" He queried after a moment, his eyes never leaving the field of play.

"We need to get Zachary to start reacting dramatically to Jo Inge's fouling," the assistant head coach said, half-smiling. "It's hard to convince the referee that there's foul play if Zachary doesn't go to the ground. For instance, he didn't go down even when Jo Inge was almost tearing off his shirt a few minutes ago."

"That may work," Coach Johansen said, a smile outlining his face. "You can go ahead and instruct Zachary on how to go about it during the half-time break. Maybe, we can get a few set-pieces out of Jo Inge and extend our lead."

"Okay, I'll make sure he understands how to handle Jo Inge before he gets back on the pitch for the second half," Coach Henriksen said, grinning. "But are we going to stick to the 4-2-3-1 formation during the second half? I'm worried about our habit of starting slow during the second half. So, maybe a highly defensive shape would be better for us."

"We'll stay with the 4-2-3-1," Coach Johansen said, his tone firm. "Changing to another formation during the second half isn't a long-term solution to our second-half difficulties. Instead, we should be honing the winning mentality of our players to do away with the problem for good. It's just that simple."

A soft smile outlined Olav Brusveen's face as he followed the happenings on the pitch with rapt attention befitting the professional TV2-Sporten journalist that he was. He didn't wish to miss any newsworthy details that might occur at any moment of the game between the two Norwegian football giants. That was especially so since Zachary, the new darling and golden goose of the Norwegian press, was partaking in the game that day.

By his side stood the members of his camera crew, following the game through the lenses of their cameras. They, too, knew how important the game was and went about their duties without a need for supervision. They were possibly capturing each and every moment of the action on the field—without even resting for a single second.

"Did you get a close-up of Zachary's facial reaction after that tackle?" He asked one of the members of his camera crew, his gaze never leaving the field of play.

"Of course, we did," one of the cameramen replied, his eyes still following the game through the lenses of his humongous Nikon camera.

"Excellent," Olav said, grinning. "We've got ourselves a good number of images for our blog tomorrow. Keep up the good work."

He was in a jolly mood as he'd already obtained more than enough discussion points that could potentially turn into trending headlines the following day. For instance, the on-pitch rivalry between Zachary Bemba, the young Rosenborg prodigy, and Jo Inge Berget, the Molde midfielder, was one such point. It could elicit a good reaction from the masses and foster a trending online debate to fuel its popularity. But that was depending on how it was dressed and presented to the public. The more details he could add to the story, the more popular it would get. So, he kept his eyes focused on the field of play as the time for the half-time break slowly drew near.

But Olav abruptly stood up from his seat when the clock on the stadium's big screen indicated that it was the 45th minute. On the pitch, Zachary had just received a pass from Mike Jensen, one of Rosenborg's defensive midfielders. For the first time in like a quarter and hour, he managed to skip past Jo Inge, his bodyguard, with a deft couple of touches.

Jo Inge tried to pull at his shirt and stop him from stepping further away from him—into Molde's half. But Zachary seemed to have already gotten used to the midfielder's bothersome fouls. So, he shrugged Jo Inge's arm away with a handoff—before stepping out of the center circle and racing towards Molde's box like the wind.

But just after he'd moved a couple of yards, two of Molde's defensive players closed him down and barred his path towards their box. And to make matters worse, Jo Inge, the relentless Molde midfielder, had also retraced his steps and managed to catch up with Zachary once more. For a moment, the three players in blue had Zachary surrounded close to the middle of the pitch.

Olav thought Zachary would do the usual and unleash a lofted pass towards the wing or kick the ball back to his defense to escape the predicament. But he did quite the opposite of what most people in the stadium expected.

In some magical fashion, he started dancing his way in and out of the three Molde players—his body going left and then going right, with the ball glued to his boot. His movements were artistic, fast, but above all, unpredictable as he slalomed his way through the confused group of players.

Olav couldn't even understand the entire process. One minute Zachary was amid the group of players, and the next, he was slipping out as seamlessly as a fish navigating the calm waters of a lake.

And without any pause, he then continued racing across the field like a bullet train on the rails.

The cheers of the Rosenborg fans resounded across the entire stadium like thunder, slowly growing to a crescendo as Zachary raced across the middle third. In a matter of seconds, he skipped past a couple of challenges before finally stepping into the final third with only the Molde defensive line between him and Molde's box.

Olav watched with undivided attention as Zachary smiled softly before setting loose a teasing through-pass into space, just behind the Molde center-backs. At first glance, it wasn't anything special—but a simple ball that could be unleashed by a five-year-old.

But Zachary had managed to time his release with perfection, making that simple through-ball the ideal weapon to beat the Molde defense. He made the whole process look so easy as he set loose Nicki Nielsen, the Rosenborg number-9, behind the defensive line.

"Did you capture all that?" Olav asked his camera crew, his eyes still locked on the field of play. He watched Nicki connect with Zachary's defense-splitting pass before racing towards the goal like the wind. And without any surprise, the on-form Rosenborg striker fired home from the edge of the box, chipping the ball over the keeper to score Rosenborg's second goal.

"Did you capture all that?" Olav inquired once again as the Rosenborg players headed to the corner flag to celebrate their second goal. But that time around, he had to yell to make himself heard over the cheers of the passionate fans that'd long reached a climax. Rosenborg was already two goals ahead in

one of their toughest fixtures of the season. The fans were almost going mad in the stands as they sang the popular Rosenborg chants.

"Of course, we did," A female member of his camera crew finally yelled back after a few seconds. "Second by second of everything, including facial expressions, footwork, reactions of opponents—we have captured it all. So, don't worry. We're professionals, after all." She grinned.

"Great," Olav said, beaming as quiet contentment spread through him. "Thanks for your hard work. But don't stop and keep on filming. The more images we have, the better stories we can develop for tomorrow's news after editing. I've got a feeling that this match might be a defining moment for both Zachary and Rosenborg. So, please don't miss anything." He added before returning his attention to the pitch where the Rosenborg players had just finished their celebrations.

Chapter 175 - In A Tough Spot I

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The referee blew the whistle for half-time at exactly 6:48 PM. That was after having added an extra three minutes to compensate for time spent on set-pieces and goal celebrations during the first half.

On hearing the whistle, Zachary immediately started to make his way off the field. His spirits were flying high since he'd managed to make yet another assist. He couldn't help but walk with a slight swagger in his step since he could hardly contain his delight.

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

"Zach-33... Zach..."

"Nicki Nielsen... Nicki..."

Like a hurricane, a wave of cheering and chanting washed across the stadium when the Rosenborg players neared the tunnel entrance.

Zachary's ears managed to pick out the names of a few players, including his, from within the rhythmic clapping and chanting around the stadium. A smile lit up his face when he heard the loud voices of the passionate fans. He enjoyed the feeling of playing in front of a humongous crowd. It raised the stakes, making the game more exciting.

The cheering was the perfect catalyst to stir him into performing at his best, especially during home games. He appreciated the passionate hardcore fans for that. So, he took a moment to wave to them before jogging into the tunnel entrance and continuing to the dressing room.

"Way to go, man," Mikael Dorsin, the Rosenborg assistant captain, said to Zachary as soon as they entered the dressing room. "You were brilliant during the first half. The way you kept connecting with Nicki in the final third was incredible. You're the true definition of the most dangerous Troll Kid ever when on the pitch." He grinned, patting Zachary's back.

"Thank you," Zachary replied, grinning. "You were good as well. You managed to completely bar Emmanuel Ekpo, that Molde right-winger, from delivering even a single cross into our box. And that was throughout the entire 45 minutes of the first half. That's quite something, especially considering how fast that Nigerian can be on the ball."

"That wasn't the case," Mikael said, shaking his head. "I was completely bored on the left flank. You guys in the middle have dominated the whole game and left nothing for us to do." He added jokingly.

Zachary continued exchanging small talk with Mikael and a few other teammates until Coach Johansen took the stage to give his half-time briefing. The coach's face was all smiles as he stepped towards the tactics board to begin his address.

"That was quite a nice game," the coach said right after all the players had quietened down and settled atop the benches around the dressing room. "I'm quite impressed with the way you controlled the tempo and hogged most of the possession during the first half. All of you were excellent on the pitch, and that's why we are leading by two goals. I'm quite proud of you. But for the second half, we'll need to add more effort if we wish to hold on to our lead and go home with the three points at the end of the match..."

As the coach started to delve into what he expected of the players during the following 45 minutes of the game, Zachary took a few moments to chug down some water. He intended to use every second to recover his stamina reserves before heading back to the pitch. He didn't want his performance to diminish in the second half simply because he hadn't used the half-time break to rest himself properly.

Nonetheless, he also kept a good fraction of his attention on the coach. Since he didn't want to miss any details, he continued listening to the tactical briefing raptly.

For the next seven minutes, the coach covered everything from the tactics, the individual roles of the players, and how to approach the game during the second half. He emphasized that the players remain focused and play at their best even if they were two goals ahead. He also urged them to try their best to avoid their habit of losing focus at the start of the second half before sending them back to the pitch to recommence the game.

Anxiety poured through Coach Johansen, like some sort kind of electrical storm roiling in his brain as he followed the proceedings on the pitch from the home team's technical area. It was already the 55th minute, 10 minutes into the second half, and yet the game was not proceeding according to plan.

Coach Johansen had never been a superstitious person in his entire life. But for the first time ever, he started doubting the world, wondering whether one of his players had recently attracted bad luck from somewhere else and passed it on to the team. He couldn't find a plausible explanation for his team conceding goals at the start of every second half.

For the game against Molde, his players had followed his instructions to the letter and maintained a high level of focus right after the half-time break. The midfielders had even managed to quickly build up momentum by working together with the forwards and wingers. Starting from the very first minute of the second half, they'd managed to begin mounting a series of relentless attacks on Molde's goal.

In those first ten minutes of the second half, Coach Johansen had been in a good mood. His players had played some good football, exchanging passes with quick precision as they bore down on Molde's goal. They'd clearly been the better team and outclassed Molde in all areas on the field of play. Be that as it may, their lead had been cut short to only one goal through a corner kick when the clock on the big screen had just indicated that it was the 50th minute. That was when the situation on the pitch had started flipping in favor of Molde.

Although the Rosenborg players continued creating chances and dictating the tempo due to their creative midfield, they kept falling short of finishing in the final third. Thanks to that, Molde slowly grew comfortable in the game and started to look more dangerous on the counter-attack.

And then, in the 55th minute, Coach Johansen felt like the entire world was working against his team after narrowly surviving another dangerous attack from Molde. The situation on the pitch was getting worse by the second. The players in blue had already counter-attacked thrice, coming close to scoring twice during the preceding five minutes of play.

What made everything worse was that his players were no longer looking as comfortable as they'd been during the first half. They were already starting to make amateur mistakes during crucial moments of the game. Coach Johansen was undecided on whether to make an immediate substitution or wait it out and hope his players would settle down as the match progressed.

"Maybe, we should introduce an extra center-back or defensive midfielder to strengthen our side at the back," Trond Henriksen, the assistant head coach, advised from beside him. "As long as we manage to maintain our lead for the next twenty minutes, we'll be on track to win. Basing on our previous performances, we'll most likely score during the last ten minutes of the second half. So, at the moment, we need a defensive-minded player on the pitch to help us weather the next few dangerous minutes."

"Okay," Coach Johansen said, taking a deep breath and cocking his head slightly to observe his assistant. "I'll go with a defensive midfielder. So, you can go ahead and inform Ole Seln?s and Mix Diskerud to warm up." He added before returning his entire focus on the field of play. Although he didn't like how his assistant kept on trying to interfere with his management style, he still had to admit that he was right that time around. Adding a defensive-minded player like Ole would most likely make it harder for Molde to hit Rosenborg on the counter-attack.

Chapter 176 - In A Tough Spot II

Within the area designated for the press, Olav Brusveen, the TV2 Sporten reporter, continued following the proceedings on the pitch. His signature soft smile outlined his face as his mood wasn't the least bit affected even after Rosenborg had conceded a goal. The more chaotic the match became, the better the headlines he would fish out for his blog the following day. Excitement had long started to swell through him as the game progressed in a much more unpredictable way.

"It's the 60th minute, and Rosenborg is still leading 2:1," he heard Kjell Roar, the commentator, say, his voice coming to him through the stadium's loudspeakers. "Rosenborg is on the ball again. Mike Jensen just controlled the ball in the defensive third before passing it on to Jonas Svensson, the other defensive midfielder, on his right."

"Jonas skips past Magne Hoseth, the Molde captain, before flicking the ball towards Zachary—who has just opened himself up close to the center-line on the left flank. It's all Rosenborg once again. The players in white and black are slowly bearing down on Molde's goal like predators on the hunt..."

Olav Brusveen turned his entire focus to the field when Zachary controlled the ball close to the touchline on the left flank. Without any dilly-dallying, the young Maestro turned around and started playing a couple of one-twos with Tarik Elyounoussi, the Rosenborg left-winger.

Their passes let them seamlessly get past Kristoffer Vatshaug, the Molde right-back, as they continued spearing deep into Molde's half through the left flank. Olav exclaimed again and again at Zachary's potential. His creativity as a player was growing steadily with every passing minute on the pitch.

The cheers of the Rosenborg fans around the stadium exploded as Zachary received a return ball from Tarik and finally stepped into the final third. But just as he was raising his leg, probably with the intention of passing, Jo Inge, the relentless Molde midfielder, slid in with a sweeping tackle to dispossess him.

However, Zachary managed to flick the ball quickly beyond Jo Inge's reach before the tackle could connect. He then followed that up with a lofted diagonal pass over Molde's defensive line to pick out Tobias Mikkelsen, the Rosenborg right-winger, on the other side of the field. With that defense-splitting pass, he'd managed to set Tobias loose on a clear path towards Molde's goal.

Everyone in the stadium, including Olav Brusveen himself, thought that Tobias would surely put the ball in the back of the net. Zachary had timed his pass perfectly to help the Rosenborg right-winger beat the defenders and leave them in the dust without much trouble. Tobias only needed to control the ball behind the defense and run for a couple of yards before firing home and widening Rosenborg's lead once more.

But the goddess of luck wasn't on his side at that moment. Olav's eyes widened in surprise as he saw ?rjan Nyland, the Molde goalkeeper, save Tobias' right-footed shot with an outstretched foot. The referee pointed towards the corner flag and awarded Rosenborg a corner kick.

"Isn't this like the second or third time Tobias is missing a chance at goal when he's one-on-one with the keeper this season?" He asked one of the members of his camera crew that was closest to him.

"It's the fourth time, to be specific," the cameraman replied, eyes still following the match through the lenses of his camera.

"Oh, that's interesting," Olav said, inclining his head to one side to observe Coach Johansen in the home team's technical area. The bald and read-bearded coach was a comical sight. He was busy mouthing what seemed to be numerous curses while gesticulating frantically at Tobias for missing the opportunity.

Olav instantly decided the coach would make a good topic for one of his articles the next day. "Make sure that you start taking some shots of Coach Johansen's facial reactions as the match progresses. Don't just focus on the field of play." He added.

"Don't worry, man," the cameraman closest to him said. "Eirik is already covering the shots of the technical staff and some of the fans. In the meantime, the rest of us are covering everything else on the field of play."

"Excellent," Olav said, beaming. "We've got ourselves a lot of content for tomorrow's headlines. I wonder how the match—" He stopped mid-sentence, his eyes snapping wide open and focusing back on the field of play.

Perjan Nyland, the Molde goalkeeper, had just made another incredible save, denying Nicki Nielsen from benefitting from the corner kick and scoring a hat-trick with a header.

But that wasn't the end of the excitement on the field of play. Perjan Nyland quickly picked himself from the ground—and without any dilly-dallying, made a long one-handed throw towards the left flank. With his strong arm, he managed to connect with Mattias Moström, the Molde right-winger, who'd long started making a run across the touchline.

The counter-attack was on. The Molde goalkeeper had caught the Rosenborg players unawares with that brilliant throw of his. Most of them were still in Molde's side of the pitch since they'd just been attacking the corner. So, it was two-against-three in Rosenborg's half during the 64th minute.

The stadium went quiet as Mattias Moström controlled the ball mid-sprint and continued across the wing, stepping past the center-line and penetrating deeper into Rosenborg's half.

Cristian Gamboa, the Rosenborg right-back, homed in on him immediately, trying to stop the lightning-fast counter-attack. But the Molde left-winger didn't try to hold on to the ball or dribble. Instead, he just flicked it towards Daniel Chima Chukwu, the Molde center-forward, who'd long started running in sync

with him through the middle. He then pushed past Christian Gamboa and continued sprinting towards Rosenborg's goal like a bullet right out of a sniper muzzle.

Daniel Chima Chukwu received Mattias' pass, without slowing down, as he'd just stepped into Rosenborg's defensive third. Without a moment of delay, he chipped the ball over the two Rosenborg players that'd been trying to intercept him. He was so quick in setting it perfectly onto the path of the bolting Mattias to beat the Rosenborg defense.

Mathias used his fast pace to bolt past the two players in white and black before connecting with the ball. Without any pause, he headed it forward—towards Rosenborg's goal and then followed after it—speed like that of a predator on the hunt. He was so fast that he managed to step into the 18-yard box in a matter of seconds before chipping the ball over Lund Hansen, Rosenborg's keeper, to score Molde's second goal for the day. 2:2.

Olav heard the traveling Molde fans start yelling and cheering like there wasn't a tomorrow even from where he stood, within the area designated for the press—close to the tunnel entrance. Molde had finally managed to equalize and even the score against Rosenborg in the 65th minute.

Olav was in a good mood as he was enjoying every moment of the game. The thrill involved within every minute on the field was what would feed and enrich his stories the following day. He looked forward to interviewing both sides right after the game.

Zachary gave a bitter laugh and cast a glance heavenward as the Molde players celebrated their second goal. He couldn't understand how his team was close to losing a game that had seemed like a sure win only half an hour ago. They'd been two goals ahead at the end of the first half, yet they'd lost that lead within the first 20 minutes of the second half. Yet, all the players on the team had been performing at their best. Zachary was almost choking on his frustration.

"Guys," he heard Tore Reginiussen, the Rosenborg captain, yelling at the top of his lungs, seemingly to make himself heard over the loud cheering in the stadium. "There's plenty of time for us to regain our lead. So, get your heads back into the game, and let's play some football. We haven't lost yet. Nicki, Zachary, and Tobias: hurry and get back into position. Let's win this game." He clapped his hands to motivate his teammates.

On hearing the captain yelling, Zachary immediately cast the negative thoughts out of his mind before jogging to his starting position, right outside the center circle. He understood that football was the sort of game where things could go wrong even if one did everything perfectly. So, Zachary shut out all the unnecessary distractions and focused back on the match with single-minded devotion. He'd decided to do his best and leave with no regrets on the pitch.

Chapter 177 - Frustration

The referee blew the whistle, and the match restarted as soon as the Molde players finished celebrating their second goal. Nicki Nielsen immediately raised his leg and kicked the ball back to Zachary in the midfield.

Zachary controlled the ball with a deft first touch a few yards away from the center circle before casting a glance around, searching for possible passing options. But he instantly noticed that the Molde attacking players were already starting to throng into Rosenborg's half with newfound motivation and energy born from having scored an equalizer. They seemed to have already altered their strategy to high-pressing tactics so as to stop Rosenborg from dictating the proceedings on the field of play once again.

Zachary's sharp eyes managed to catch a glimpse of the sturdy figure and bearded face of Jo Inge Berget, the Molde midfielder, running towards him. The sight of the Molde man was like a case of a racing horse dashing towards the finish line on a racetrack—the finish line being him in that case.

Nevertheless, Zachary wasn't intimidated since he'd already estimated that the midfielder would need a couple of seconds to reach his position. So, he flashed the rapidly approaching Jo Inge a grin before flicking the ball to his left foot and passing it towards Mikael Dorsin, the Rosenberg left-back.

Without any delay, he ran into another space to allow himself to receive a return ball before his pass could connect with Mikael. His immediate goal was to help his team re-establish dominance by ensuring that Rosenborg would continue dictating the tempo within the midfield. So, he was determined to do all the hard work and make all the necessary runs across the pitch to make that happen as quickly as possible.

Mikael Dorsin received Zachary's pass close to the touchline on the left flank. He handled the ball beautifully and then relinquished it to Mike Jensen, one of the two Rosenborg's defensive midfielders on the field.

Mike Jensen received it and passed it to Jonas Svensson, the other defensive midfielder, who'd positioned himself on his right. Jonas didn't even try to control the ball since Magne Hoseth, the Molde

captain, was closing in on him like a predator on a hunt. Instead, he passed it to Tore Reginiussen, the Rosenborg captain, with his first touch.

Zachary immediately stepped further away from his mark and created enough space for himself to receive the ball when he saw Tore get to the end of the pass from Jonas. The Rosenborg captain was a player with good vision. In an instant, he managed to spot Zachary from the crowd of players within the midfield and then passed the ball to him in the next second.

Zachary brought the ball under control with his right foot. He then pushed it forward, moving further away from Jo Inge Berget to create a couple of yards for himself. However, just as he was about to take another step and dash into Molde's half, Etzaz Hussain, the substitute Molde midfielder, closed him down and barred his sprinting path.

Zachary didn't try to dribble, though. He was one hundred percent sure that Jo Inge, his bodyguard for the day, was somewhere right behind him. So, he flicked the ball to his left foot before passing it towards the left flank, where Tarik Elyounoussi had long started making a run along the touchline.

Tarik controlled the ball mid-sprint and continued his dash across the touchline, dashing past Kristoffer Vatshaug, the Molde right-winger, in the process. He then cut into the pitch for a couple of yards before passing the ball back to Zachary in the midfield. Zachary controlled it beautifully on the edge of the final third before unleashing a first-time lofted pass towards Tobias Mikkelsen, the Rosenborg right-winger lurking on the right flank.

Tobias chested the ball down with style, befitting the swift winger that he was. He immediately fed it past Martin Linnes, the Molde left-back, before beating him for pace. But just as he began cutting into the pitch, racing towards Molde's 18-yard box from the wing, he came across a roadblock in the form of Knut Olav Rindarøy, the center-back in blue.

Knut Olav Rindarøy timed his tackle perfectly to slide in and steal the ball off Tobias' feet in some inexplicable way. And without a moment of delay, Knut picked himself from the ground and kicked the ball hard and high—towards the other side of the pitch.

Close to the center circle, Zachary started running back to his half to defend as he watched the ball fly high above him, heading towards Rosenborg's box. He didn't want to allow the Molde players to mount another successful counter-attack.

However, he couldn't travel faster than the ball, and his speed couldn't help him move between two places within an instant. So, he could only watch helplessly as the ball reached its highest point before starting its descent into Rosenborg's defensive third. And to make the situation worse, Daniel Chima Chukwu and Mattias Moström, Molde's dangerous attacking players, were already lurking like thieves around the area where the ball was heading.

Zachary immediately upped his speed and continued on track towards Rosenborg's half. He was well aware that his teammates in the defense hadn't stabilized yet after conceding two goals. So, his immediate intention was to make it back to the defensive third as fast as possible—to help defend against the new threat.

But even before he could cover a dozen yards, he saw Daniel Chima Chukwu, Molde's center-forward, connect with the long pass. He outmaneuvered Stefan Strandberg, one of Rosenborg's center-backs, for aerial superiority and then chested the ball down to Mattias Moström, the Molde left-winger.

Mattias pounced on Daniel's pass before the other Rosenborg defensive players could react and then took off like the wind, circumventing Jonas Svensson, the Rosenborg defensive midfielder. With his fast pace and nimble footwork, he slalomed his way past three more Rosenborg players, including Tore Reginiussen, and was soon on a highway route towards goal.

However, Tore Reginiussen, the Rosenborg captain, didn't allow him to do as he pleased. He tracked after the swift Molde winger and managed to get to him close to the edge of the box. Without any hesitation, the captain slid in wholesale and managed to drive the ball out of play. But during the process, he also tripped Mattias Moström, sending him tumbling to the ground, just within the boundaries of the 18-yard box. The referee immediately blew the whistle and pointed to the penalty spot as the stands occupied by the Rosenborg supporters quietened down to almost a total silence.

Molde had managed to win a penalty in the 69th minute, just four minutes after scoring their second goal. But that wasn't the worst thing that had happened to Rosenborg at that moment. The referee refused to listen to Tore Reginiussen's pleas and showed him a straight red card for the last-man professional foul he'd just committed. The situation on the field of play was a horrific nightmare that managed to rattle all Rosenborg players on the pitch, Zachary included.

Chapter 178 - A Light At The End Of The Tunnel

Zachary sighed, shaking his head on seeing Tore Reginiussen hand over the captain's armband to Mikael Dorsin before quietly marching out of the pitch. He didn't blame the defender for making that tackle since he would have done the same if he'd been the one in that situation. Nonetheless, he was still depressed by the progress of the match.

All the Rosenborg players had played great passing football from the first minute of the game, yet they were on the verge of losing. No matter how much they'd tried attacking Molde, they just hadn't managed to break their spell of bad luck and had kept on missing opportunities. On the other hand, their opponents had gotten much fewer opportunities and a small portion of the possession. Yet they'd managed to score two goals within the first 20 minutes of the second half and had just then won a penalty. Zachary couldn't help but wonder whether it was inevitable for Rosenborg to lose that match. But a moment later, he shook his head to clear his mind and rejected the thought right away.

He would never give up on a match before hearing the final whistle. He'd watched teams like Liverpool, Barcelona, and Manchester United make incredible comebacks even when they were three or four goals down during his previous life. So, he intended to continue giving his all even when his team was already a man down. As long as he didn't give up, anything could happen at any moment of the game—and just maybe, his team would walk away with the three points at the end of the night. So, with a soft smile framing his face, he started to make his way towards the edge of Rosenborg's box to prepare for the penalty kick.

"Now that's Molde for you," Zachary heard a voice behind him just as he'd moved a couple of yards and stepped into Rosenborg's defensive third. "Did I hear someone say that Molde can't compare to Rosenborg during some interview? Let's see if that someone can say the same thing after this match..." The voice continued humorously.

Zachary immediately turned around and noticed that Jo Inge, his bodyguard for the day, was behind him. The Molde midfielder had fallen into step with him at some point and was busy throwing out verbal jabs to annoy him.

Zachary just gave him a once-over and shook his head without bothering to make any comment. He turned around and increased his pace, leaving the midfielder behind as he continued towards Rosenborg's box. The match was yet to end, and he didn't want to exchange needless words with an opponent.

During his previous life, he'd watched great players like Zinedine Zidane and Mario Balotelli get themselves into trouble just from conversing with an opponent during the tense moments of the game. Zachary didn't want to become like them since he knew that he wasn't the best at controlling his temper. So, he'd already made it a point to avoid talking to opponents, especially at the professional stage where players could do almost anything to win.

In the stands, Kristin covered her eyes with a manicured hand after seeing Mattias Mostrøm step into Rosenborg's box to take the penalty. The tension of the game had long twisted her heart to the point that it'd started beating erratically. She didn't even have the guts to continue watching the proceedings on the pitch, especially when Molde had a great chance to score and take the lead from a penalty kick.

The score was 2:2 in the 70th minute. If Molde managed to score, her team, Rosenborg, would find it hard to equalize when they were a man down due to the red card. So, she hoped that Lund Hansen, the Rosenborg goalkeeper, would pull a miracle and keep the score level for the moment. That was the only chance Rosenborg would have at walking away with any points from that game.

"Huge moment," she heard Kjell Roar, the commentator, intone after a few seconds. "Mattias Mostrøm, the Molde number-9, steps up to take the penalty. He is against Lund Hansen, the Rosenborg keeper, during this decisive moment. Oh, my! And he saves it. Oh, my! Crucial, crucial, crucial save. What a brilliant save by Lund Hansen..."

Kristin moved her hand away from her eyes as a wave of cheering washed across Lerkendal, drowning out the mellifluous voice of the commentator. But she sighed with regret as she'd already missed the best part, which was the save by Lund Hansen. She could only wait to watch it on the flashbacks on the big screen as the match progressed. Nonetheless, her hopes had soared since Rosenborg still had a chance of walking away with at least a draw from the fixture.

On the pitch, Zachary's spirits were on cloud nine. His face was all smiles as he congratulated Lund Hansen upon saving the penalty, together with the rest of his teammates within Rosenborg's box. He couldn't believe that his team had managed to come out of the tense situation unscathed. He felt like running towards Jo Inge and gloating but stopped himself after a bit of deliberation. At that moment, he only needed to concentrate solely on the game and keep away from all the factors that could potentially harm his concentration.

"Guys," Mikael Dorsin, the acting Rosenborg captain, yelled at the top of his voice, clapping his hands. "We still have about twenty minutes to go. Let's focus and defend. We don't want to waste Lund's incredible save. So, focus, focus, and focus. I believe that if we give it our all, Molde will never threaten our goal again. But first, let's begin by defending against this corner."

On hearing the acting captain's animated roar, all the Rosenborg players returned their full attention to the game as they prepared to receive the corner.

Zachary's spirits brightened on noticing his teammates regain their fighting spirit even when they were at a numerical disadvantage due to the red card. As long as his teammates didn't give up, he was sure that Rosenborg could walk away with at least a point out of the game. So, he, too, focused on marking an opponent within the box with renewed vigor.

Chapter 179 - The Amazing Rosenborg Fans

With a quick gesture, Coach Johansen motioned for the fourth official to make the substitutions quickly before Molde could take the corner kick. Dejection, Depression, Distress, and several other capital Ds had long whispered through his thoughts, translating into a scary frown that'd already hardened his facial features.

Even though his team had just survived conceding a goal from a penalty, he still regretted not having made a substitution much earlier—before the red card. Had he done precisely that, just maybe, his team would never have had to go through the remaining twenty minutes when with a numerical disadvantage.

Be that as it may, he refused to resign himself to losing, even when playing with the numerical disadvantage born of the red card. That was the reason he'd decided to introduce both Ole Selnes and Verner Ringnes that were all defense-minded players at the core of their playing style. He wanted them to help the team defend against the relentless attacks from Molde during the remaining eighteen minutes, plus added time. He was hopeful that his team would walk away with a draw if the two of them followed his instructions to the letter and played their defensive roles perfectly.

"Can you just make the substitutions," he yelled at the top of his lungs on seeing the fourth official taking his time to put up the substitutions board. "Why are you delaying when the ball is clearly out of play? Your dilly-dallying may cost our team dearly. So, can you please act like a professional and do your job properly?"

On hearing the coach, the fourth official just smiled wryly before putting up the board to signal for the substitutions. And to Coach Johansen's relief, the referee immediately halted the proceedings on the pitch right before the Molde players could take their corner kick.

"Remember my instructions," Coach Johansen yelled at his two substitutes just before they were about to enter the field. "And don't forget to pass on my instructions to the rest."

"Yes, coach," Both Ole and Verner replied in unison, clearly delighted by the prospect of getting a chance to play an official Tippeligaen game.

Coach Johansen could see that they were brimming with energy and excitement to perform, even though Rosenborg was a man down. He felt a slight wave of relief flood through his system on noticing their zeal and eagerness for playing time. So, for the first time, like in fifteen minutes, he smiled as he watched the two of them replace Tobias Mikkelsen and Tarik Elyounoussi, the two wingers. Maybe, with that energy they were projecting, they could do some wonders when they got on the pitch. That was what he hoped.

As soon as the two substitutes stepped into their positions, the referee blew the whistle immediately and motioned for Martin Linnes, the Molde left-back, to take the corner kick.

Zachary reacted instantly, shutting out everything else and concentrating solely on marking his man. His mind was already working in overdrive, trying to deduce what kind of corner the Molde left-back would deliver into the box. He was determined to do his part on the team—by giving it his all to prevent Molde from scoring their third goal and taking the lead. So, he even started yelling at his teammates to close down the unmarked players within the box in preparation for the corner.

But Martin Linnes, the Molde number-14, didn't give Rosenborg any more time to prepare. He quickly delivered a teasing ball into the horde of players waiting inside the penalty area from the corner.

Zachary sprung into action on noticing that the ball was on course towards his position. He pushed off the ground like a basketballer, outmuscled Jo Inge in a battle for aerial superiority by relying on his incredible physique—and then headed the ball out of play. The referee blew the whistle and pointed to the corner flag once again.

Martin Linnes quickly delivered another corner into the box with all the haste he could muster, probably not wanting to waste any time. But that time around, Nicki Nielsen, the Rosenborg center-forward, outjumped the rest of the players within the penalty area and cleared the ball with a well-timed header, guiding it to the outside of the box.

Zachary immediately took a step, intending to chase after the ball after noticing that it was about to land outside the box. He hoped to get to it quickly before anyone else—and then mount a counter-attack on Molde.

But just as he was taking the second step, he felt a tug on his shirt for the umpteenth time during the match, and his forward momentum instantly reduced. Without looking back, he knew right away that it was his old bodyguard, Jo Inge, who'd pulled at his shirt to prevent him from getting to the ball. Since he was determined to do everything necessary to help his team get a positive result against Molde, he decided to go with Coach Trond Henriksen's strategy. He threw himself to the ground in a dramatic fashion—and cried out loud in order to convince the referee that an opponent had fouled him.

"Ref, ref," he shouted at the top of his lungs while rolling on the ground to catch the referee's attention.

FWEEEEEEEE

The referee immediately blew the whistle before jogging towards his position. "Are you okay?" The referee asked, raising his arm and motioning for the medical team to come onto the pitch.

"Jo Inge yanked me back by pulling at my shirt," Zachary replied, his face contorting into an expression that was the true definition of a person in pain. "I think I sprained a ligament when I tumbled to the ground," he added, holding on to his ankle. On the inside, he was happy to stay on the ground since the more time he could waste, the better his team's chances would become.

"Are you okay, man?" The team physician asked as soon as he'd knelt beside him. "Where does your leg hurt? Can you still move it?"

"We need to waste a bit of time since the team is in a tight spot," he whispered to the physician after noticing that the referee had moved out of earshot—towards the linesman. "So, please play along, and let's win ourselves some time to organize ourselves."

"No need to worry, I know what to do," the team physician replied, without a flicker in his expression. He then continued to check out Zachary's ankle with all the seriousness befitting the seasoned doctor that he was.

Zachary could tell that he'd been in similar situations probably countless times. His acting when diagnosing Zachary's ankle could win an Oscar. Together with Zachary, the two of them acted out a scene that was so convincing. It was to the point that even some of his teammates came over to check on his situation. But Zachary only winked at them before continuing to nurse his supposed injury.

A wave of panic surged through Emily when she saw Zachary go to the ground, clearly in pain. She'd never seen Zachary stay down for more than a couple of seconds, even after facing the hardest of challenges. Emily was sure that Zachary was in pain just from seeing his expression.

But a minute or two later, she finally relaxed on seeing Zachary get to his feet before being helped out of the pitch by the medical personnel. She'd realized that he wasn't seriously injured since he could walk. So, with a light heart, she returned her entire focus to the field of play to continue following the game.

But then again, she was taken aback after a moment. She noticed that Zachary seemed to have returned to full fitness right after stepping out of the field and receiving a pain-relieving spray on his ankle. Without any dilly-dallying, he then chugged down some water before returning to the pitch even before Rosenberg could take the free kick. Emily gave a bitter laugh on realizing that Zachary had just played everyone, including her, for fools. He wasn't seriously injured—but had only been wasting a bit of time.

"BOO! BOOO!! BOOOO!!!..."

Emily's ears picked up a gradually increasing wave of booing rising from the stands occupied by the Molde fans as soon as Zachary stepped back on the pitch. The Molde fans seemed quite ticked off with his antics and were making it known through their voices.

But the Rosenberg fans around the stadium replied in kind with their own cheering to counter the booing. Emily's bewildered ears drank in one long, thundering "Zach! Zach! Zach-33!" and then her hearing seemed drowned, incapable of making sense of any of the sounds. The whole mass of the Rosenberg fans in the stands rose as one, stamping their feet and clapping their hands to match the roar of their voices. They sustained a regular and rhythmic wave of cheering that shook the whole Lerkendal—the collective sound seeming like the one made by an approach of a frightening army.

Emily sighed in wonder after experiencing the energy and intensity of the Rosenborg fans. All around her, it was a wild burst of yelling and cheering—prolonged fiercely to the limit to drown out any booing that might emerge from the Molde supporters. With just their enthusiasm and passionate support, they had battled the Molde fans and emerged as the victors. Their level of dedication to their team was something she had only experienced a few times.

Chapter 180 - Tension Across Lerkendal

Coach Johansen cast a quick glance at his wristwatch and noticed it was already coming to the 78th minute of gameplay. He let out a pent-up breath of air, rubbed his hands together, and returned his full attention to the proceedings on the field of play.

He'd never yearned for the time to pass by quicker before that moment. He hoped for the match to end soon so that his team could at least walk away with a point.

The pressure his players were facing on the field due to Tore Reginiussen's red card was immense. The Molde players had fully capitalized on their numerical advantage during the few minutes after the red card. They'd managed to keep Rosenborg's ten men on tenterhooks, leaving them without a single moment for a breather.

Coach Johansen had already noticed that a few of his players were almost out of breath. He could tell that their stamina reserves were close to depletion from their reaction times. He was worried they would slacken and start making mistakes. So, he decided to motivate them.

"Don't relax," he yelled at the top of his voice, clapping his hands for emphasis. "Keep on defending. You're doing a good job so far. Nicki, stay on the centerline and wait for the ball there. You don't need to keep heading back to defend. Your job is to keep their defenders under pressure and scoring when you get an opportunity. Zachary, be sharp and strategic when marking the spaces in front of our defensive third..." He intoned words at the pace of a machine gun while still following the match with rapt attention.

The tension on the pitch was at a level that tickled at Kristin's taught nerves irritably. Like the rest of the Rosenborg fans within the stands of Lerkendal Stadion, she was the image of anxiety itself as she forced herself to continue following the proceedings on the pitch.

The Molde players continued to mount attack after attack on Rosenborg's goal at an interval of nearly every two minutes. They'd switched from their counter-attacking strategy and were now utilizing wing-play to deliver diagonal balls and crosses into Rosenborg's box.

With the change, they'd managed to connect seamlessly with their attacking players, with a fast and relentless playing style that was the true definition of attack-minded football. That way, they'd managed to push almost all the Rosenborg players back into their defensive third, leaving only Nicki close to the centerline.

Kristin's anxiety mounted with every passing minute as she watched the game. A couple of times, Molde had come close to scoring a third goal through their attacking players. However, Lund Hansen, the Rosenborg keeper, had done a phenomenal job stopping two attempts from Daniel Chima Chukwu, the Molde center-forward, in the 75th and 78th minutes. Furthermore, another shot from Mattias Moström, the winger, had smashed off the crossbar after taking a slight deflection off one of the defenders in the 80th minute.

"Martin Linnes, the Molde left-back, showcases his great technique and produces a teasing cross into the box," Kristin heard Kjell Roar, the commentator, yell out loud. "Oh, my goodness me! Mattias Moström, the Molde winger in shirt number-9, latches on to the accurate cross within the 18-yard box and unleashes a strong shot towards the goal. But Lund Hansen, the Rosenborg keeper, is well-positioned and dives to make an incredible save. What a match we have here! Harald! You're quiet! What's going on? What is your say on the progress of the match?"

Kristin heard Harald Brattbakk, the pundit for the day, sigh audibly. "Truly unfortunate for Tore, the Rosenborg captain, to get that red card in the 69th minute. The tables have turned due to his sending off—and we now have the Molde players dictating the tempo due to their numerical advantage. Rosenborg is barely hanging on to keep things level here at Lerkendal, and yet six minutes, plus added time, still remain to the final whistle. Truly unfortunate."

"The million-dollar question is one," Kjell Roar said. "Do you think Rosenborg will manage to resist Molde's attacks until the final whistle with the way they're playing?"

"That's a question I can't answer at the moment," Harald replied in a flat voice. "This is football, and it's highly unpredictable. For instance, in the first half of this game, it was Rosenborg dictating the proceedings. The Troll Kids led by two goals at half-time, and we all thought they were sure to win. But look at the situation right now. That's the unpredictability of football. So, maybe, the game will end as a

draw or, possibly, a win for Molde. But what we also can't rule out is that Rosenborg can also win even if they are at a disadvantage considering numbers."

Kjell Roar chuckled at that. "The Rosenborg fans would go mad if that happened. But let's wait and see how the match progresses. We're entering the last five minutes of official time. It's still all Molde on the field. Emmanuel Ekpo, the Molde right-winger, just got on the end of a diagonal ball from Magne Hoseth, his captain. Oh, he twists and turns—and fires a rocket towards goal. But it's a pity that Mike Jensen, one of Rosenborg's defensive midfielders, stands in the way. The Rosenborg man manages to block the shot and direct the ball away from the goal. But not far enough..."

Panic surged through Kristin. Her hands became cold and clammy as she watched the deflected ball bounce at the edge of the box—towards Magne Hoseth. The Molde captain had been lurking around the arc of the 18-yard box, completely unmarked. Without losing composure, Magne met the ball on the volley with his left foot—and unleashed a shot towards goal before any of the Rosenborg players could react.

Kristin's body went cold with dread as she watched the ball flash through the crowd of players in the box, heading towards the goal like a bullet out of a sniper rifle's muzzle. "Please don't go in," she mumbled, her hands squeezing into fists. At that moment, she wished for telekinetic powers so that she could will the ball to deviate away from its course. She didn't want to see her team lose after holding on to the draw until the last four minutes of the game.

The goddess of luck probably sympathized or maybe took pity on all the other Rosenborg fans in Lerkendal. Lund Hansen, the Rosenborg goalkeeper, jumped high and committed himself to a full-body dive. He just managed to punch the ball away from the goal. With a strong fist, he managed to propel it all the way to the right flank. Rosenborg had survived conceding once more.