

Greatest 191

Chapter 191 - The Worries Of The Acting Captain

Mikael Dorsin, the acting Rosenborg captain, sighed with frustration as he watched the V?lerenga players celebrate their goal on the sidelines. Just because of the mistake of one teammate, his team was already on the back foot very early in the game. God! He hated to lose the most. He could feel his emotions all over the place as he recalled the goal. He would have liked to run to Christian, the player that'd committed the amateur mistake, and given him a mouthful of what he felt. But he swallowed down his frustration and instead turned to the technical area to observe Coach Johansen's reaction to V?lerenga's first goal.

But his eyes widened with surprise a moment later. He instantly noticed that Verner R?nning and Ole Seln?s, two of Rosenborg's defensive-minded players on the bench, had already started warming up on the sidelines. He was baffled and concerned by the coach's rashness and impatience.

"The coach seems to be quite angry," Mike Jensen, Rosenborg's defensive midfielder, said after walking up to him. "He's even planning to make a substitution this early in the game!"

"But we can't blame him," Mikael said, tamping down his irritation. "We played poorly on the defensive end. Most of us are committing simple mistakes that are slowly causing our downfall. If I were the coach, maybe, I, too, would be thinking about a substitution right now."

"But surely you don't believe that substitutions this early in the game is the answer to our problems," Mike Jensen said, shaking his head slightly. "We're only a bit lax when on the ball because of playing at an away ground in an unfamiliar environment. Moreover, you've got to understand that the V?lerenga fans aren't making it easy for us to focus on the game."

"I'm sure that all our players will grow into the game soon—and get used to this environment within the next few minutes," the defensive midfielder continued. "They will then start performing as usual, and we'll score. Don't forget that we have Nicki, Tarik, and above all, Zachary upfront. They can create goal-scoring opportunities at any moment. So, I don't believe there's any need for substitutions right now."

"I concur with you on that," Mikael said, caressing his chin while observing his teammates. "But why are you telling me all this? I'm not the coach."

"You can try talking to the coach about this," Mike Jensen replied, smiling slightly. "He'll listen to you since you're the captain."

"Hahaha..." Mikael gave a bitter laugh. "Do you think that I'm Zachary, Tore, or Nicki? You've got to know that aside from them, the rest of us on the starting eleven are easily expendable. So, I'm not going to irritate the coach further by telling him how to do his job."

Mikael was also quite worried about how things were progressing.

He also believed a substitution that early in the game was not the best solution to combat the laxity of the Rosenborg players on the field of play. A change in players could lead to more disorganization within the team, bringing about more tactical difficulties. That was even more so since they'd conceded a goal only a minute ago.

So, Mikael was determined to prevent such a scenario from happening. But he wasn't going to achieve that by complaining to the coach. He had his way of doing things using the vibrant voice that whoever had created the world had given him.

"Guys," he shouted at the top of his lungs as he began moving around the pitch—through the ranks of his teammates. "Let's not lose morale because of a single goal. Let's not mind the fans and first concentrate on stabilizing our game. We're the stronger team. We'll surely be able to score if we play like usual..."

On hearing Mikael yelling, Zachary immediately jogged back to his position in the left midfield. He hoped for the game to restart as quickly as possible. He was eager to help his team get an immediate goal—and bring proceedings back to a level ground within the Ullevaal Stadion. However, the V?lerenga players were taking their time celebrating the goal. They were clearly wasting time and delaying the restart.

Zachary was already feeling impatient from the long pause in the game. Nevertheless, he remained in his position awaiting the referee's whistle without any complaint.

He didn't want to get on the wrong side of the highly volatile V?lerenga fans by protesting against the wastage of time to the referee. To a certain degree, he was rattled by their intensity. He believed catching their attention in the wrong way was a fate worse than waiting a couple of more minutes for the game to restart.

The referee acted harshly to resolve the time wastage crisis. He showed yellow cards to two of the V?lerenga players before sending them back to the pitch for the restart after the goal. But the booing that resulted from those two cautions was so loud that it flooded out any other sound in the stadium. Zachary could only sigh again and again at the intensity of the fans.

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The referee blew the whistle and motioned for the Rosenborg players to restart the game in the 24th minute. Nicki Nielsen, the Rosenborg star striker, immediately passed the ball back to Jonas Svensson in the right midfield.

Zachary reacted right away on seeing Jonas, his counterpart in attacking midfield, control the ball. He opened himself up by running further left into space on the left flank—with the intention to escape the reach of Christian Grindheim, the stocky V?lerenga attacking midfielder, who was quickly approaching him.

To his relief, Jonas, the other Rosenborg attacking midfielder, managed to spot him right away. Without any dilly-dallying, he relinquished the ball to him before the opponents could react.

Zachary felt his heart palpitating with a blend of excitement and anxiety as he watched the ball approaching the space in front of him. He was feeling anxious because of the booing by the V?lerenga fans. But at the same time, his spirits had already brightened since he was about to receive the ball.

He was in a messy state of mind that he didn't fancy in the slightest. He preferred to remain cool-headed and confident on the pitch. So, he forced himself to calm down as he controlled the pass mid-sprint before continuing to run towards V?lerenga's half amid the rising booing from their fans.

Kristofer H?stad, the V?lerenga defensive midfielder, quickly closed in on him, blocking his sprinting path. However, Zachary did not attempt to dribble. He immediately fed the ball to Tobias Mikkelsen, the

Rosenborg left-forward, who'd long started making a run along the touchline. Zachary didn't stop his run, though. Instead, he circumvented Kristofer and continued to push on deeper into V?lerenga's half.

Chapter 192 - A Missile For An Equalizer

Tobias Mikkelsen didn't hold the ball for long after receiving Zachary's pass. He instead dashed across the touchline for a couple of yards before passing it back to Zachary, who was running in sync with him a few meters to his right.

The two of them continued playing a one-two's, racing past a couple of other V?lerenga players and cutting into the pitch. They connected well to exchange quick and seamless passes, magically approaching the opponent's box, like predators on the hunt. They moved so fast and were upon the defensive line in mere seconds.

Zachary received another return pass from Tobias, just as Simon Larsen, one of the V?lerenga center-backs, was about to close him down at the edge of the box.

But he didn't panic, though. He had several passing options around him and wasn't the least bit afraid he would lose possession. So, with a deft touch, he pushed the ball out of the center-backs' reach with his left foot. His mind was already working in overdrive to deduce how to make the most out of the attack.

He understood he couldn't delay even for a single second while in front of the opponent's box since the defenders were already bearing down on him fast. So, his first idea was to play a through-pass to Nicki Nielsen, the on-form Rosenborg center forward. He could set him loose on a path towards the goal if he could time the release perfectly.

But out of the corner of his eye, he noticed the V?lerenga keeper standing off his line before he could follow through with the thought. It was as if the keeper was inviting him to try his luck from the edge of the box. Of course, he wouldn't disappoint the keeper by refusing such a gift.

He first slowed down a bit to draw in the two defenders, who were almost upon him once again. He then pushed the ball slightly beyond him with the outside of his left boot, making sure to angle his body in the same direction. It looked like he intended to dash into the box by taking advantage of the space left by the defenders on his left. But while he was mid-motion, he changed his contact surface to the inside of his boot, initiating an elastico dribble and leaving the defenders confused for a few moments.

Before the defenders could recover, he flicked the ball to his right to create more space for himself. And with quick movements, he smashed the ball with the inside of his right boot—sending it on a curving trajectory towards the goal as the entire stadium turned quiet. For the first time since the match began, the V?lerenga fans stopped making noise as a moment of silence descended upon the Ullevaal Stadion.

A soft smile outlined Zachary's face as his eyes followed the ball. It soared over and around the defenders before spinning inwards and then bounding towards the goal. It was like a missile heading for its intended target.

At that moment, Zachary was confident he'd scored with his attempt since the keeper was still about two meters off his line. So, he raised his arms to celebrate the equalizer. But in the next moment, he let them dangle at his side as an abrupt change occurred.

Gudmund Kongshavn, the V?lerenga goalkeeper, had managed to backtrack in some magical way. He leaped, contorting his tall frame backward and punching the ball over the crossbar. With that incredible save, the keeper sent the stadium into a frenzy of cheering once again.

The referee immediately blew the whistle and pointed to the corner flag.

Zachary could only sigh in despondence as he watched the V?lerenga players celebrating together and congratulating their keeper upon the incredible save. He had done everything right while taking that shot, but he'd still failed to score. So, he was feeling a little downcast.

But then, out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Mikael Dorsin, the Rosenborg acting captain for that match, stealthily picking up the ball and then placing it in the corner spot. Zachary's hopes immediately reignited, the disappointment of missing a chance to score all forgotten within an instant.

Before the V?lerenga players could organize themselves into a proper defensive shape, he started making his way towards the corner flag, speed like a horse on a racetrack. To his satisfaction, Mikael spotted him immediately. The Rosenborg acting captain quickly took the corner short and passed the ball to him amid the growing booing of the fans.

Zachary received the grounded pass just as he'd traveled a few meters out of the box. Without any slight pause, he spun around, with the ball hooked to his left boot, and was once again facing V?lerenga's goal before any opponent could close him down. It was a god-sent opportunity for Rosenborg to score.

Zachary felt he had all the time he needed to work with the ball. It was another moment of truth to test V?lerenga, and he knew it.

Adrenaline started flooding through his system, quickening his heartbeat as he flicked the ball forward—launching it a few meters in front of him. With the deft touch, he managed to push it closer to the corner edge of the box. He could hear the booing of the V?lerenga fans rising to a crescendo as if they were trying to disrupt his focus.

But he forced his mind to push away all the outside interference and concentrated on the issue at hand. In a flash, he raised his head and cast a fleeting glance at the situation in the box to determine his next course of action. He noticed that a few of the V?lerenga players were already rushing towards him like mad, but he didn't mind. He had all the time in the world to do the needful.

Without losing his composure, he took a step after the ball, raised his leg, locked his ankle—and then swung down hard and strong—to unleash a missile of a shot towards the goal.

"BAAM!"

He smiled as his ears managed to pick up the sweet sound of his boot smacking the ball when he made his intended contact. He then raised his head once again to observe the results of his attempt.

That time around, he hadn't applied any fancy tricks, like a spin, while shooting the ball. So, it flashed through the players on a straight trajectory towards the goal as if it was a bullet leaving a sniper's muzzle. In about a second or two, it homed into the top right corner, sending the Ullevaal Stadion into another moment of deathly silence. The keeper couldn't even react and stayed rooted in one position because of how heavy and fast the shot was.

1:1.

Rosenborg had managed to react immediately and score an equalizer in the 27th minute, just three minutes after conceding. Zachary raised his arms where he stood, at the corner edge of the box, to celebrate the goal. His teammates soon rushed towards him and joined the celebration amid the rising cheers of the few Rosenborg fans that'd traveled to Oslo to watch the game.

Chapter 193 - Game Progression

Kristin was immensely relieved when Zachary scored the equalizer to tie the score at 1:1. She hadn't been able to travel to the Ullevaal Stadion in Oslo to watch the match live since she was busy preparing for her trip to Bergen with Zachary the following day. Instead, she had watched the game on TV—back in the comfort of her living room.

When V?lerenga had scored the first goal, she'd thought that Rosenborg was in for a tough 90 minutes. So, she'd felt anxious. But when Zachary scored the equalizer only four minutes later, she cast her concerns aside.

She'd started believing that as long as Zachary was on form, Rosenborg would find it very hard to lose even if they wanted to. As long as he was present on the pitch, he could create and bag goals at any moment to destroy their opponent. So, there was no use for needless worry.

"He's getting better and better with every match," Monica R?nning, Kristin's flatmate, said, her eyes never leaving the screen. She was seated on the same sofa as Kristin, also following the progress of the game. On the table before them lay various snacks and drinks to enhance their experience of viewing the match.

"On screen, he looks a lot different from how he usually does," Kristin commented.

Her mind went back to the night they had had dinner with him a few days prior. "He's almost like an entirely different person."

"How so?" Monica asked, leaning forward and picking a few snacks from the table before her. "I don't see the difference."

"Maybe, it's because you've only seen him a few times," Kristin observed. "But the difference is there for sure. On the pitch, he appears to be a confident, no-nonsense person. But outside the field, he loses all his assurance and acts shy. Don't you remember he barely spoke during the first few minutes of our dinner last Tuesday?"

"Oh," Monica said, smiling a bit and cocking her head to observe Kristin. "Aside from being a little too quiet, I don't see much difference. Unless he only acts that way when he's alone with you. And you know what that means. Don't you?"

"Are you trying to tease me again?"

"Nah," Monica said, shaking her head. "I'm not kidding. If he's acting that way around you, then he might really be interested in you. Try to gain his attention the next time you see him if you want to test that theory."

"Didn't you say you'd be going with him to Bergen tomorrow?" Monica asked when her friend stayed quiet. "That will be the perfect opportunity to test out my theory."

"Can you stop with the jokes, please?"

"I'm dead serious here," Monica said, sighing. "I'm your friend. So, I'm just giving you a little bit of advice. Remember: with how fast his fame is rising, you've got to act fast. Otherwise, some other hottie will grab him quicker than you can snap your fingers. But that is—only if you have feelings for him. If not, pretend I didn't say anything."

"Let's watch the match," Kristin said, hoping to change the topic. Even though she liked Zachary, she didn't want to come off like a stereotypical fangirl by throwing herself at him. That was a big no for her.

Moreover, she wasn't entirely sure whether the favorable impression he'd left on her was due to him being a Rosenborg player. She wasn't confident she was genuinely interested in him on a personal level. So, she had no intention of following her friend's advice.

"But, tell me one thing," Monica continued, her eyes crinkling at the corners. There was mischief in her eyes when she gave her friend a sideways glance. "Was he as good as he is now back when you first saw him? I find him impressive. I would grab him for myself if I'd been you back then."

"What do you mean?" Kristin was quick to reply. She inclined her head slightly to observe her friend, her gaze probing. "Are you referring to skill with the ball?"

"What else would I be talking about?" Monica answered and chuckled. "Of course, it's about his skills as a footballer."

"Oh!" Kristin said, nodding and returning her gaze to the TV screen. "Seriously, I'm also amazed by his rate of progress. When I first saw him in DR Congo about two years ago, he was good, yes. But he wasn't this freakishly good. His improvement over the past two years has been truly incredible. I really don't know how he trains to..." She stopped mid-sentence and abruptly raised the TV volume with the remote. Since Rosenborg was on the attack once more, she forgot everything else around her—and concentrated on following the match progress.

"It's Zachary on the ball now," she heard the commentator speaking, the voice coming clearly to her from her home theater system. "He skips past Christian Grindheim, the V?lerenga captain, before feeding the ball to Borek Dockal, Rosenborg's right forward."

"Borek on the ball. He twists and turns and plays the ball back into midfield—to Jonas Svensson. Jonas quickly passes the ball to Zachary once more."

"Zachary on the ball. He wriggles past Kristofer H?stad, V?lerenga's defensive midfielder, before passing the ball into the right-wing with a diagonal ball over the midfield. Oh! What a beautiful switch of play. Rosenborg continues to build momentum on the attack! The Troll Kids are on fire. Even the booing of the V?lerenga fans can't stop their drive to attack..."

Kristin's attention was entirely on the screen. She watched Rosenborg grow more dominant in the game and start dictating the tempo.

All the Rosenborg players had begun playing fantastic one-touch or two-touch football after the goal. They were tearing the V?lerenga formation apart with extreme technicality while moving the ball fluidly around the pitch. Their playing style was a feast for the eyes as they continued mounting more pressure on V?lerenga's goal.

Kristin enjoyed watching the new Rosenborg. She enjoyed watching the games with Zachary on the lineup. He helped the side play a lot better with his creativity on the field of play.

The minutes passed quickly. Soon it was the 44th, only moments away from the end of the first half. But Rosenborg had still failed to score a second despite continuing to launch waves of attacks at their

opponent's box. Both Nicki Nielsen and Borek Dockal had even missed clear chances at goal. So, Kristin thought the match would go into half-time without any more drama, with the score still deadlocked at 1:1.

She was finding the ending of the first half a bit anticlimactic. She was about to reduce the TV volume—to return to her conversation with Monica. But then, she saw Zachary make a sliding tackle and win back possession for Rosenborg—just close to the center circle.

Her heart began beating hard with anticipation as she placed the TV remote back on the table. She remembered both Zachary and Nicki were most dangerous during the final minutes of either half. There was no way she would miss out on the final moments of the first half.

After winning back possession with a successful tackle, Zachary immediately picked himself from the ground before passing to Jonas, the other attacking midfielder, who was already running in sync with him.

Jonas controlled the ball mid-sprint in the right midfield. With a deft touch, he fed it between the legs of Morten Berre, V?lerenga's left midfielder, and circumvented him. He continued dashing towards V?lerenga's box like the wind amid rising cheers from the few Rosenborg fans present in the Ullevaal Stadion.

Giancarlo González, the V?lerenga center-back, came up next to close down Jonas. But Jonas didn't try to push past him. Instead, he flicked the ball to his right—to Zachary, who'd already matched his run, bearing down on V?lerenga's goal like a wolf chasing prey.

Zachary didn't even pause to control the ball. He immediately passed it on to Nicki, who'd already escaped his marker within the final third. Nicki received it perfectly with a deft touch and spun around to face V?lerenga's goal.

Kristin felt it was another goal-scoring opportunity created by the perfect teamplay of Zachary, Jonas, and Nicki. The three of them had worked together well to penetrate V?lerenga's defensive shape with seamless passes.

She felt a wave of excitement wash through her as she saw Nicki dash past Simon Larsen, the other V?lerenga center back. He then continued bolting towards the box, like a bullet train on the rails, with the ball staying close to his feet.

"That's surely another goal," Monica commented from beside her. She was slowly munching on potato chips as she watched the match. "The V?lerenga defenders have allowed Nicki to rush past them! He won't miss, not with the form he's on."

"Shhhh," Kristin instantly sashed her flatmate. She didn't want to miss the moment Nicki unleashed a shot at goal.

She kept her eyes fixed on the screen as Nicki ran like mad and stepped into the box. The number-9 then tried to chip the ball over the keeper, and Kristin almost jumped up to celebrate since she, too, believed Nicki couldn't miss. But the following few words of the commentator stopped her in her tracks.

"Oh, my! What a superb save by Gudmund Kongshavn," she heard the commentator say, his voice rising and becoming more animated. "What an incredible run that was from Nicki before trying to chip the ball over the goalkeeper. But—however, Gudmund managed to get his fingertips on the ball and push it away from his goal. The referee points to the flag for a corner kick."

Chapter 194 - Corner-Kick

"How could he even miss that?" Coach Johansen exclaimed, shaking his head as he watched Mikael Dorsin walk to the corner flag.

He wasn't angry with Mikael, the acting captain, who was about to take the corner kick. Instead, he was immensely exasperated by Nicki wasting a clear goal-scoring opportunity when he was one-on-one with the keeper.

"Damn!" The coach let out a few more expletives— of the sort that couldn't be said in front of children, to vent his frustration. Despite being the coach, some happenings on the pitch occasionally managed to sour his mood immensely. Missing a clear goal-scoring chance was close to the top of the list of those occurrences.

But as a coach, he had to remain alert to every single change in the game. He couldn't let negative thoughts like frustration influence his decision-making as the match progressed. So, he tried his best to push the irritation to the back of his mind as he returned his focus to the field to continue following the game.

Despite his still bitter mood, he couldn't help but smile when he saw Mikael trying to take the corner short and quick once again.

However, the V?lerenga players had learned their lesson and were on the alert for his antics. Within a few seconds, they marked every Rosenborg player that could connect with the corner. They were not giving any Rosenborg player even a single inch of space within the box.

Based on their reactions, it seemed the corner-kick that had resulted in Zachary's goal a few minutes prior was still very fresh in their minds.

Coach Johansen's soft smile morphed into a frown as he continued observing the situation in V?lerenga's final third. He could tell that his players were not yet ready for the corner. So, with a hand sign agreed upon before the match, he motioned for Mikael, his acting captain, to delay restarting gameplay. In the meantime, he shouted at his players, trying to motivate and organize them with his words.

"Focus, focus, focus on the corner," he yelled at the top of his lungs. "Zachary! Join the rest in the penalty box and ready yourself to directly attack the corner. Don't just stand at the edge of the box. Move!" He waved an arm before him for emphasis.

Coach Johansen couldn't help but sigh as he watched Zachary begrudgingly trek towards the box. With his looming height at 6'4, he could turn into a nightmare for defenders during set-pieces.

With a bit of effort, he could transform into an assassin within the box. He could be someone like Marouane Fellaini or Zlatan Ibrahimović if he put some effort into training his heading technique.

Coach Johansen could even picture all teams in the Tippeligaen coming to fear him in the near future—just because of that physique of his.

But the only problem hindering that scenario from developing was Zachary's attitude. The coach couldn't comprehend why the boy didn't fancy heading into the area to attack corner kicks whenever there was a chance. It was against all reason and a clear waste not to utilize such a clear height advantage. So, he made a mental note to have a word with Zachary about the issue when a chance arose in the near future.

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The referee blew the whistle and motioned for Mikael to take the corner after trying his best to stop the turmoil in the box. But still, the players continued to pull and push at one another, all trying to outmaneuver their opponents. Even some of the Rosenborg players had started committing fouls despite being on the attack.

"Stay calm, guys," Coach Johansen yelled anew, stepping close to the boundary of the technical area. "Don't get sucked into their fouling. Just focus on attacking and leave the rest for the referee to handle. We only have a minute or two to half time. So, focus and make the most out of this corner."

Mikael Dorsin, the Rosenborg acting captain, finally floated a teasing ball into the congested area.

But coach Johansen was not satisfied with its trajectory.

He sighed with a little despondence, thinking Mikael had taken a sub-par corner. That was because it didn't match any of the corner drills they'd practiced during the training sessions before the game. By following its course, he'd quickly judged that it would descend on the far side—close to the boundary of the box. He doubted any of the Rosenborg players would get to it that far away from goal.

But his heart started racing and palpitating with anticipation the next moment—as the ball began descending fast, heading close to the far post. He'd just noticed that Zachary had already broken away from his marker and positioned himself in the exact spot where the corner ball was heading. The African prodigy had seemingly anticipated the delivery—and reacted fast—before any other player, winning himself a second or two ahead of his mark.

He pushed off the green like a basketball player out to make a dunk—and jumped high to meet the corner ball. Two Vlerenga players that'd managed to reach his position tried to stop him a moment later. But he outmuscled them by relying on his incredible physique and continued rising into the air.

Coach Johansen could hear a momentary silence descend upon the stands within the Ullevaal Stadion when Zachary emerged victorious in a battle for aerial superiority to connect with the corner ball. He believed Rosenborg would surely score since it was Zachary making an attempt.

He raised his hands when he saw Zachary thrust his head forward to plant a heavy header towards the inside of the right post. But the next moment, he let them dangle at his sides before repeatedly punching the air in front of him. His team, Rosenborg, had just missed another goal-scoring chance.

The ball had smashed off the right post after a slight deflection on one of the V?lerenga players within the box.

It was frustrating for Coach Johansen to watch such missed opportunities. He could feel anxiety thrumming through his veins as the ball bounced back into the field and headed towards the right side of the box.

But he didn't stay irritated for long as he noticed that it was once again on a straight course towards Zachary's position.

"You better not mess this up again, Zachary," Coach Johansen mumbled, obviously not expecting the player to hear him. He was only psyching himself up to prepare for what was to come as he watched Zachary get to the rebound before the confusion in the box could settle down.

And God, did he pull the trigger!

Coach Johansen's hopes sored as Zachary raised his leg and swung it down to meet the ball on a well-timed half-volley. He blasted it with his left boot so forcefully that it looked like he intended to send anyone that got into its path straight to the hospital. The ball flew straight into the top right corner of the net.

Since Zachary had unleashed the shot so close to the goal, it was unstoppable. Gudmund Kongshavn, the V?lerenga keeper, didn't even manage to react in the slightest. He could only turn around and watch the ball dancing in the back of the net after a few seconds. By then, Zachary had already started running to the corner flag to celebrate.

1:2.

Rosenborg had managed to score and take the lead in the 45th minute, just before half-time.

[What a way to score! Power to overcome all obstacles.]

For a moment, Coach Johansen was at a loss for words. The moment Zachary made contact with the ball kept replaying in his mind. He'd even forgotten to celebrate the goal as he mulled over Zachary's uncanny connection with the rebound.

As a coach, he was well aware that timing volleys and unleashing first-time shots at goal were difficult feats to achieve when luck wasn't on one's side. But Zachary made it look easy even while near crowded spaces on the field. He never lost his composure. He could always time the ball perfectly—and take the shot first-time despite the situation around him. The boy was simply a genius beyond geniuses considering his possession of such an incredible ability.

"Coach," a yell beside him interrupted his thought process. He inclined his head to the side and found both Verner Rønning and Ole Selnes, the two substitutes he'd previously instructed to warm-up, standing by his side.

"What's the matter?" He asked, looking at the players inquisitively.

"Should we continue warming up?" Verner queried, scratching at his chin. "Or should we take a few moments to rest?"

"Just continue warming up," Coach Johansen was quick to reply. "You know how badly we've been performing at the start of the second half during the past few games. So, I want you to be ready since I might require you to enter the match and stabilize the situation at any time. Are we together?"

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

"Then, off you go," Coach Johansen said, shooing them away with a wave of his hand. "But keep the warm-up light so that you don't tire yourselves out before entering the game. And don't forget to take some water."

"Yes, coach."

Chapter 195 - System Milestone Within Sight

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The referee blew the whistle for half-time in the 47th minute, just a little over a minute after Rosenborg's goal. The V?lerenga players had just initiated an attack after the restart when the referee mercilessly brought the first half proceedings to an end.

Zachary immediately exchanged high-fives with the teammates close to him before starting to make his way towards the dressing room for the half-time break.

A soft smile played over his face—a clear tell-tale sign of the mood he was in at that moment. He'd managed to score twice against V?lerenga that day, taking his overall tally for both the month and the season to eight goals. He was only a goal behind the two top scorers: Nicki Nielsen, Roseborg's number-9, and Frode Johnsen, an Odds BK center-forward.

At first, before he'd made it to the starting line-up, he'd thought that fulfilling the system mission would be a hard-to-achieve endeavor. But after playing a few games on the first team, he'd developed solid confidence and great belief in himself. He was sure he could reach the system's milestones for the Tippeligaen mission. He believed he couldn't fail to accomplish at least a single milestone if he continued playing as a starter in most of Rosenborg's games.

"Nice game, Zach," Coach Johansen said, patting his shoulder as he walked into the dressing room. "You were amazing out there."

"Thank you, coach," Zachary said, smiling.

"But please strive to keep up the hard work during the second half," the coach said. "And continue shooting and testing their keeper whenever you get the chance. Okay?"

"Yes, coach," Zachary replied dutifully. "I'll do that."

"Then good." Coach Johansen nodded. "You can sit down and get some rest, Zach." He added, looking around, seemingly to check whether all the players had already arrived in the dressing room.

Zachary left the coach to his devices and settled on a bench in the far corner of the dressing room. He concentrated on quickly recovering his stamina by chugging down water and taking a light snack as Coach Johansen started his half-time address.

"Nice play during the first half," Coach Johansen said, sweeping his gaze across all the players. "Although we started off slow, we managed to recover and take the lead thanks to Zachary's brilliance up front." He smiled.

"But we haven't completed the task at hand yet," the coach continued, his voice becoming animated. "We still have to maintain our lead throughout the second half and try to score a few more goals if we want to go back home with all three points. I don't want to see us conceding goals at the start of the second half—like we've done the previous few matches. So, I'll be making a few changes in the squad for the second half to make sure we don't falter like usual."

Coach Johansen's eyes narrowed as he glanced around. "Verner Rønning will come on for Cristian Gamboa while Ole Selnes will replace Jonas Svensson in midfield."

"We shall then immediately switch to a 4-2-3-1 formation so that we become more solid at the back. Zachary will remain as the only attacking midfielder and play right behind Nicki upfront. Ole and Mike Jensen will play as our double pivots and defensive midfielders—while Borek and Tobias will both pull back and play as real wingers."

"Please remember," Coach Johansen continued, his voice taking on a harsh tone. "I don't want to see any careless mistakes on the field of play during the second half. If you receive the ball and find you have no space to maneuver, pass it on. It's just that simple. Don't play around like amateurs and cause problems for the team. Are we together?"

"Yes, coach."

"This is our last game before the break," the coach intoned, his voice lowering. "So, please give your all so that we can win and have a good holiday. But should we lose, then the circumstances will force me to organize specialized training for you guys when the rest of the teams are on holiday."

A wave of chaotic murmurings washed over the room as soon as Coach Johansen started talking about infringing on the players resting time. It clearly showed they were against continuing training during the upcoming Tippeligaen break.

"Quiet! Listen closely." The coach was surprisingly sharp, and all the players in the dressing room quietened down.

"I'm not playing around by saying what I've just said," he continued after a moment, his gaze darting across the room with unconcealed harshness. "If you didn't hear me well the first time, I'll repeat myself once again. There won't be any holidays for you if I notice that you're still sub-par as professionals during the upcoming second half. Circumstances will force me to organize specialized training for you to raise your skill level. It's as simple as that."

"So, go into the second half and concentrate," he continued, half-smiling. "Give your all and play your best football today. I'm very sure we'll win, hands down—if we do that. Remember, we're the better team. So, there shouldn't be any possibility of us losing if we play like close to our best. Are you with me? If you understand me, reply, 'Yes, Coach.'"

There was an awkward and slightly out-of-sync reply of "Yes, Coach" from the players in the dressing room. It seemed the players were still unhappy about the coach's threat to cut their holiday time short.

Zachary was surprised. He would readily go for the specialized training without any complaints if the coach did follow through with his threat. Moreover, he would even be a little glad. He couldn't help but wonder why his teammates seemed so against the prospect of practicing during the break when they were professional footballers too.

"I couldn't hear you all," Coach Johansen said, his voice rising after hearing the awkward response from the players. "You sound like people who haven't eaten in days. So, please repeat after me. 'Yes, coach. We do understand.'"

Zachary couldn't help but smile when he heard the players do a better job at replying in sync that time around.

He could see the reasoning behind the coach's weird approach towards motivating the team. Rosenborg had been conceding a lot of goals after half-time over the previous few games. The coach was intent on ensuring that such a scenario didn't develop that day. So, he'd just utilized a mixture of hard and soft tactics to try and motivate them to play at their best during the second half.

"Okay then," Coach Johansen said, a sunny smile outlining his face. "That was the kind of response that I would expect from players on a team aiming to be champions. Remember: we won't be able to perform if we're in low spirits. So, cheer up and go back to the pitch for the second half. I'll be watching each one of you from the sidelines." He added, his tone conclusive.

Chapter 196 - Unexpected Deadlock

Coach Johansen stayed true to his word regarding changes in the line-up after half-time. Immediately, after exiting the tunnel for the second half, he went ahead and signaled to the fourth official to introduce both Verner Rønning and Ole Selnes as substitutes.

He couldn't let any mishaps happen when his team was already in the lead. So, he decided to take a guarded approach and introduce two defensive-minded players to reduce the likelihood of the opponents scoring.

"Make sure you stay solid at the back," he said to the two substitutes as they were going through the mandatory routine of being checked by the fourth official. "Always make first-time clearances—and please, avoid making mistakes close to our defensive third. If there are opportunities, try to pass the ball to Zachary. He'll be our playmaker for the second half. Are we clear?"

"Yes, coach," the two players replied in sync just before the fourth official raised the board to announce their entry.

"Remember my words and pass them on to the rest of the team," Coach Johansen yelled just as Ole, the first substitute, was heading into the pitch. "And please be mindful of the possibility of counterattacks. We must not falter during this game."

"Yes, coach," Ole shouted as he ran towards his position in Rosenborg's defensive midfield. Verner, the other substitute, followed after him shortly and took up the right-back position in the new 4-2-3-1 formation.

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The referee blew the whistle soon after.

Mustafa Abdellaoue, V?lerenga's center forward, responded immediately—and passed the ball back to his midfield to kick-off the game after half-time.

The second half began at breakneck speed, with Rosenborg flying forward at will and the V?lerenga players looking explosive on the counter. The magnificent end-to-end exchanges saw Nicki Nielsen, Tobias Mikkelsen, and Borek Dockal—all pass up good opportunities to score for Rosenborg in the opening seven minutes of the half. On the other end, Mustafa Abdellaoue, the V?lerenga center-forward, also failed to score after a swift lightning-fast counter in the 57th minute.

It was an exciting second half for sure, but not for the coaches of both teams.

Coach Johansen had already grown tense as he watched V?lerenga launch more frequent counterattacks. He couldn't let the situation be. So, he decided to motivate his players with the power of his words once more.

"Focus on maintaining possession," he yelled from the sidelines. "Try to avoid needless mistakes and focus on dictating the tempo. Don't be impatient while attacking." He was shouting at the top of his lungs to make himself heard over the loud cheering in the stadium.

"Ole! Move back a bit," the coach continued as he paced the entire length of the boundaries of the technical area. "You're a defensive, not an attacking midfielder. So, no need to move forward. Tobias and Borek! Please start falling back and supporting the backs when we lose possession. You're no longer forwards but wingers now. And please do watch out for those counters..."

He was vocalizing words at the pace of a machine gun as he tried his best to organize his team into a proper shape so as to guard against V?lerenga's counterattacks. He only stopped yelling when they started growing more dominant a few minutes afterward, in the 60th minute. By then, he'd already relaxed, thinking Rosenborg had weathered the most dangerous minutes at the start of the second half. He couldn't have been more wrong.

Although team V?lerenga looked down and out, it was suddenly back in the game with a bolt from the blue from Christian Grindheim, the captain, in the 75th minute. The V?lerenga midfielder produced a sublime long-range effort that stunned the Troll Kids with only fifteen minutes left on the clock. He managed to score and bring proceedings back to level ground, sending the entire Ullevaal Stadion into a frenzy of wild cheering.

2:2.

"Damn!" Coach Johansen could not help but curse out loud as he watched the V?lerenga players celebrate. His players had played well on the attack, for sure. They'd followed all his instructions to the letter but still conceded after an unexpected long-range shot.

The game situation was close to prompting him to switch his strategy back to pure attack by sacrificing a part of the defense. He was thinking of instructing Ole Seln?s to push forward and play as an attacking midfielder. That way, his team would constantly commit more numbers forward and increase the chances of scoring.

"Maybe, we can wait it out and see how our players react," Trond Henriksen, the assistant head coach, said to him when he was still mulling over the possible change.

Coach Johansen frowned a bit as he realized that his assistant had seemingly read what was on his mind.

[Have I become that much of an open book?]

Coach Johansen felt a little embarrassed at failing to keep his composure despite being the head coach. He realized he'd become very impatient and strayed close to changing the whole game plan only because of the frustration born of watching his team concede an equalizer.

At that moment, he understood that he still had a lot to learn concerning being the coach of one of the biggest teams in the Tippeligaen. At the very least, he needed to grasp how to conceal his emotions and hide what he was thinking at all times.

"Thank you," he said, nodding at Trond Henriksen. "We shall go with what you have suggested. Let's hope our players can come through and take the lead once again."

"I think they will," Coach Henriksen said, smiling a bit. "I don't think players like Zachary will let the game end like that. So, let's have some faith in them and see how they get themselves out of this. We should also remember that it's good sometimes to let the players have some freedom on the pitch."

"Okay, I'll try to do exactly that," Coach Johansen replied before returning his attention to the pitch.

A few minutes later, he acknowledged that his assistant had guessed right. The Rosenborg players had not let the fact that they'd conceded an equalizing goal dampen their mood. Instead, they'd continued pouring forward and generated even more goal-scoring chances.

But, their efforts were continuously thwarted by some outstanding last-ditch defending by the V?lerenga back-four.

Nicki Nielsen came closest to scoring with a thumping volley in the 80th minute. But his strike was wonderfully saved by Gudmund Kongshavn, the on-form V?lerenga keeper. That was even after a deflection that left him wrong-footed.

Coach Johansen could only sigh after watching yet another missed opportunity. He'd already grown numb to the fact that his players were repeatedly missing chances. So, he didn't yell out a word—but kept watching the match with a forced poker face.

Rosenborg's probing continued as the game approached the 85th minute, though to no avail. That was thanks to nearly all the V?lerenga players moving back to defend. They only left Mustafa Abdellaoue, their center forward, upfront. The rest of the nine players in blue would always remain behind the ball whenever Rosenborg gained possession.

They were clearly playing the 'park the bus' tactic, making it harder for Rosenborg to score. Thanks to their shameless method of defending, the score remained deadlocked at 2:2 as the game progressed to the final four minutes.

"Start floating in more crosses into the box," Coach Johansen decided to break his silence once again on seeing the situation on the pitch. "Zachary! Try testing their keeper using long-range efforts whenever you can. Nicki! Remain standing close to their final man as you wait for an opportunity. Focus! Focus!" He yelled, clapping his hands for emphasis.

Chapter 197 - Outdoing Himself

Zachary immediately opened up himself to receive the ball when he heard Coach Johansen yelling. Mike Jensen, one of Rosenborg's defensive midfielders, spotted him and passed to him right away.

Zachary fought down rising frustration as he controlled the ball close to the center circle. He was well aware that only about five minutes were remaining until the end of the match. So, he knew he had to do his best to create a scoring opportunity as soon as possible. Otherwise, Rosenborg would fail to end the night with three points in the bag and fall further behind Strømsgodset, the team leading the Tippeligaen table.

Casting a glance across the field of play, he instantly noticed that Borek Dockal, Rosenborg's right-winger, had just stepped away from his marker on the right flank. With the help of the Zinedine-Pirlo Mental Juju, he judged right away that Borek was the best option to receive his pass at that moment.

So, without any dilly-dallying, he flicked the ball to his left and stepped away from a tackle from Morten Berre, Vålerenga's left-midfielder. He then kicked the ball hard with the outside of his boot to unleash a raking pass towards the right-wing. He didn't stop there, though, but pushed forward—towards Vålerenga's box, even before his pass could reach its intended target.

Borek Dockal utilized his incredible pace to race past Jan Lecjaks, Vålerenga's left-back, and connected with Zachary's through-pass. He controlled the ball mid-sprint with a deft first touch before continuing to spear into Vålerenga's box through the right flank.

"Borek!" Coach Johansen hollered out from the visiting team's technical area. "Quickly cross into the box. Don't hold the ball for too long..."

The Rosenberg right-winger quickly followed his coach's instructions. He floated a teasing cross towards V?lerenga's box just as he was stepping into the final third.

Nicki Nielsen, the Rosenberg number-9, who was always present in the opponent's box at the right time, reacted immediately. He escaped his mark and jumped high to connect with the incoming cross—and then plant a header towards the goal from around the penalty spot. However, his effort towards the inside of the right post was comfortably rebuffed by the keeper.

Before Nicki could react and pounce on the rebound ball once more, Simon Larsen, the V?lerenga center-back, cleared it further away from the box. He kicked it hard and high towards the center circle enlisting some passionate applause from the home fans.

Mike Jensen, Rosenberg's defensive midfielder, jumped high and headed the long ball to Stefan Strandberg, the center-back. Stefan received it and kicked it to Ole Seln?s, Rosenberg's defensive midfielder, who'd come on as a substitute.

Ole controlled the ball beautifully close to the border of Rosenberg's defensive third before passing it quickly to Zachary.

Zachary received the pass close to the centerline on the left flank and skipped past a sliding tackle with a deft second touch. Without a pause, he bolted towards V?lerenga's box before any of the opponents could react.

Morten Berre, the V?lerenga left midfielder, was soon upon him with a sliding challenge. But, Zachary simply flicked the ball to his left before skipping past the tackle and continuing towards the opponent's goal through the middle.

As his long strides ate away at the yards of space across the middle third, he looked up ahead, intending to find a teammate as an outlet for the ball. But then he heard Coach Johansen yelling from the sidelines.

"Try shooting from a distance, Zachary," the coach yelled from the sidelines.

Of course, Zachary concurred with the coach to try his luck from outside the box. He'd already noticed that the final third was jam-packed with plenty of players in blue. It was clearly a zone of focused, intense rival pressure resulting from V?lerenga's 'pack the bus' tactic during the final minutes.

With his high game intelligence, he judged that there was a little-to-no-chance Rosenborg could break down such a defense—and go ahead and manage to score in the remaining few minutes. So, he reckoned the best way to test the V?lerenga keeper at that moment was by utilizing long-range efforts or crosses into the box.

On coming to that conclusion, Zachary immediately decided to take action right away and unleash a long-range shot at goal.

But just as he was raising his leg to smash the ball towards goal, he felt a slight tug on his shirt. Without any moment of deliberation, he went down to the ground and started crying 'ref' soon after.

The referee immediately blew his whistle and awarded Rosenborg a free kick in a position around thirty-five yards away from V?lerenga's box.

"BOOO! BOOOOO! BOOOO..."

Zachary could hear the booing of the V?lerenga fans rising to a momentous crescendo as he picked himself from the ground. But he didn't mind them in the slightest.

He was in a good mood since he'd just increased his team's chance of scoring by winning a free kick in the final third. He was smiling on the inside and wasn't the least bit mindful of the fans. Instead, all that was on his mind was how to make the most out of the free kick.

"Zachary," Mikael Dorsin, the acting captain, said after walking up to him. "You're taking the free kick?" He asked.

"Of course," Zachary replied, picking up the ball.

"Good," Mikael replied, nodding. "But the set-piece position seems a bit far. Don't you think that we should maybe try floating the ball into the box for others to head?"

"I don't mind the distance," Zachary replied, smiling slightly and observing the situation in V?lerenga's box. He noticed that the referee had already started organizing the wall in preparation for the set piece. "As long as it's within the final third, I can always find the target. So, don't worry." He added, tone confident.

"Okay, then," Mikael said. "Try your best then. I wish you luck."

"Thank you," Zachary replied. "But I'll need both you and Borek to stand with me on the ball. That way, we'll be able to keep the keeper guessing until I take the free kick."

"We can do better," Tobias Mikkelsen, the Rosenborg left-winger, chipped in after walking up to their position. "Since there is some distance to the goal, why don't we try out one of those routines we had previously practiced for set-pieces?"

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves here," Mikael, the acting captain, said. "Since Zachary is taking the free-kick, he should be the one to decide on its strategy. The rest of you are only distracting him with your suggestions."

"Aye, captain," Tobias replied, smiling.

"So, Zachary," Mikael said, looking towards him. "Would you like to include some a simple routine before the free-kick, or will you take it directly?"

"I don't mind," Zachary said. "Let's do it."

"Good," Mikael said, smiling. "Let's show the V?lerenga keeper the power of teamwork during a set piece."

The four of them discussed several routines to use for the free kick. Both Tobias and Borek had a lot of suggestions. However, Zachary ended up rejecting most of them since they were overly complicated. He

ended up picking a simple enough one, involving only three players, just as the referee finished organizing the situation in the box.

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The referee finally blew the whistle and motioned for the Rosenberg players to take the free-kick in the 87th minute.

At that instant, Zachary took a few steps back from the ball.

Meanwhile, Borek also moved back a bit before starting to run towards the ball once immediately afterward. His expression was dead serious as he lifted his leg and swung it down like he intended to take the set-piece himself. He even managed to fool the players in the wall to jump up and attempt to block his effort.

But instead of smashing the ball, Borek slightly flicked it to his left, where Tobias Mikkelsen was waiting. Tobias didn't do much—but just brought it under control, setting it up perfectly on Zachary's path.

Zachary immediately met the ball mid-roll and rifled a superb left-footed strike from around thirty-five yards away from goal. He was in a hyper-focused state since he'd just activated the Dead-Ball Specialist Juju prior to starting his run towards the ball. His risk analysis and spatial awareness stats had momentarily rocketed to the S grade, making him feel like he had everything under control at that moment. So, it was easy for him to find gaps in the defensive shape of the opponent and make use of them. Moreover, the skill had helped him to shut out all the booing from the V?lerenga fans. He was in his best state when he unleashed the missile towards the opponent's goal.

"Oh, it's Zachary taking the free-kick," Kristin heard the commentator say. "Oh, my goodness me! Sensational! Why am I not surprised the ball is in the back of the net. In the 88th minute, Zachary Bemba manages to score and help Rosenberg take back the lead from a set piece. The score is 2:3 in favor of Rosenberg. What a shocker! That's a hatrick for the young Rosenberg number-33. What an incredible night for him..."

Kristin had already jumped up from her chair to celebrate. She jumped around in the living room as she mumbled the phrase: 'we're going to win' repeatedly—over and over again. She was like a little girl that had just seen Santa on Christmas Eve.

"Will you please settle down," Monica, her flatmate, said to her. "The replay is coming up. You're most likely going to miss it if you don't sit back down."

"Replay," Kristin's mumbled, her eyes widening with anticipation. She settled back into the sofa, besides Monica, to continue following the game. To her relief, the replay of the goal came up a few seconds after. She watched as Zachary's unleashed his stunning long-range effort and beat the keeper from thirty-five yards away. A soft smile had already outlined her face since watching the highlight in slow motion made it much more exciting.

"I think we'll be the champions this season," Kristin announced after watching the replay. "With the way the team is playing, that shouldn't be hard at all."

"With the way Zachary is playing," Monica corrected, smiling a bit. "That's a hattrick for him today, and he has managed to rescue the team from an unfavorable situation yet another time. If I were him, I would already be asking for a wage increment. But have you considered that Rosenborg might not be able to keep him at the end of the season?"

Kristin sighed, shaking her head. "Let's not think about that, now," she said before returning her attention to the match on screen.

Zachary's stunning goal wasn't the final highlight for the match. In the 91st minute, the V?lerenga center-back Giancarlo González made a terrible error of judgment and gave the ball straight to Rosenborg's center-forward Nicki Nielsen.

The on-form forward wasted no time smashing the ball into the back of the net to make the score 2:4 with only two minutes of added time remaining on the clock. The Rosenborg players then went on to hold on to their two-goal lead and end the night with three points in the bag.

A deep sense of contentment swelled within Zachary when he was presented with the match ball by the referee right after the final whistle. He had managed to bag three goals in a single match, accomplishing his first-ever hat-trick on the professional stage. Moreover, he'd moved closer to the pinnacle of the list of top scorers. Only Nicki Nielsen still lay ahead of him by a single goal.

"Zach," Mikael Dorsin, the acting captain, hollered out to him. "You don't have to keep gawking at the match ball. It's not going anywhere."

Zachary could only smile wryly in response to the acting captain's verbal jabs. He didn't want to respond since any reply from him would elicit more teasing by the eccentric veteran defender.

"Anyways," Mikael continued after seeing him remain silent. "Jokes aside. Come, join us. Let's thank our fans for traveling so far to support us."

All the players on the squad, including substitutes and training staff, joined hands and raised them towards the stands occupied by the few Rosenborg fans that'd managed to travel to Oslo.

The passionate fans responded in kind by chanting "Shalalalala Oh Rosenborg" — over and over again. They sang at the top of their voices, clapped their hands, and stamped their feet—until the whole stadium was shaking. At that moment, it felt like the stadium was weathering an earthquake.

After celebrating with the fans, Zachary immediately headed to the press area. Since he'd scored three goals and became the man of the match, the coach had delegated him the role of handling the post-match interview once more.

He was under no pressure as he already had plenty of experience dealing with the press. Be that as it may, he was still shocked stiff when he reached the press area.

Olav wasn't the only one waiting for him. Instead, he found a chaotic horde of journalists armed with cameras and microphones waiting to interview him. Even stadium security was involved in trying to bring order to the area.

"Order, order, please," Zachary heard one of the security personnel yell out loud. They were doing their best to organize the reporters while he was only a few steps away. "Only the TV2 Sporten people have rights to all post-match interviews. Everyone else, please vacate immediately."

He stopped in his tracks on hearing that. The entire chaotic situation forced him to wait a couple more minutes for security to finish clearing out the other reporters before he could step up for his interview.

"Welcome, Zachary," Olav Brusveen said, officially starting the post-match interview. "Well played. You got the match ball by scoring those three goals and achieved your first hat-trick in your professional career. How special a night is this for you, Zachary?"

"Well," Zachary said, scratching his chin and smiling slightly. "Scoring three goals makes the night special, sure. But what makes it even more special is that Rosenborg, my team, won. The fans are happy, my teammates are happy, and the coach is also happy. Everyone is happy, and that makes me even happier."

"Nine goals for you this month, including eight in the Tippeligaen and one in the Cupen this season, so far," Olav said, maintaining his signature professional smile. "If Nicki had not managed to score in the final minutes today, you would be leading the list of the top scorers for this season. Moreover, you even have three assists in the Tippeligaen alone. What a month this has been for you, Zachary! How did you manage to achieve all these feats in your debut month? What's your secret?"

"The secret is simple," Zachary replied, grinning. "Hard work and luck."

"Hard work and luck," Olav repeated as if mulling over the words, his smile never wavering. "I think you're the first player I've interviewed who keeps on mentioning luck as a contributor to some of your achievements. You're an odd player, Zachary."

Zachary chuckled slightly at that. "But luck is a factor that plays a major part in one's achievements," he said. "If I hadn't been lucky in today's match, that corner ball wouldn't have come towards my position. Then, I wouldn't have scored that header. So, I still believe luck is a major factor in any player's success."

"What are the other factors, then?"

"Of course, talent and hard work."

"So, do you believe that you have all the three factors on your side? Is that the reason you have had a very successful debut month?"

"Well, yes, in a way," Zachary replied, nodding. "I've been working hard on and off the pitch. And I truly believe that with the way I'm playing, I've got a bit of talent. And we can't forget that luck has also been on my side. But of course, I've also received lots of support from my coaches, agent, and teammates. They have been very supportive and greatly encouraged my growth with the team."

"Oh," Olav said. "With all those factors backing you, do you have hope that you'll be able to score more goals and win the Golden Boot this season? Or maybe, will we see you become the youngest MVP or player of the season—ever in the Tippeligaen?"

Zachary could only smile wryly at that. "I've got no definite answers for that question, Olav," he replied. "Football is a team sport played by eleven players. Anyone on the pitch can score the goals and help the team win. So, I cannot stand here and claim I'll be the top scorer for sure. But what I can say is that Rosenborg will continue doing its best to win all matches and emerge as the Tippeligaen champions this season. At least, I have some confidence when saying that."

Olav chuckled. "I like your team spirit, Zachary," he said, his eyes crinkling at the corners. "But the match aside. A little bird told me that you might be thinking about leaving Trondheim for the bigger stage during the upcoming Tippeligaen break. Is this true, or is it just some rumor flying around?"

Zachary frowned slightly on hearing that. "That little bird of yours must have fed you some misleading information," he said, sighing and shaking his head. "The last time I checked, which is now, I've got no plans to leave Rosenborg. I hope you didn't pay for the info since it's completely false."

"Is that right?" Olav said, raising a brow. "Then, I guess that little bird surely gave me some wrong information. Anyway, Zachary, thank you for your time once again. Congratulations on your incredible performance in today's match. And we hope to see you many more times here next month."

Zachary immediately trekked to the dressing room after the interview. On the way, he kept wondering where Olav had gotten the information that he was transferring out of Rosenborg. Was Red Bull spreading rumors about him to encourage his transfer? Or was there another party intent on harming his reputation with the Rosenborg fans? He kept mulling over the issue as he walked through the tunnel—but no answer came to mind until he reached the visiting team's dressing room.

"There comes today's star," Nicki shouted as soon as Zachary had entered the locker room. "First hat-trick! How are you feeling?" He asked, taking on a reporter's tone.

"Great," Zachary replied, deciding on humoring him. "And how did you feel when you scored the fourth goal in the final minutes, Nicki?" Zachary countered with his own question, also imitating Olav Brusveen's tone.

The rest of the players in the dressing room either whistled or laughed at that. They were all still in a celebratory mood after securing their seventh consecutive win. They'd managed to maintain their position as second on the Tippeligaen table—just one point behind Strømsgodset IF, the table leader.

"So, where are we celebrating today's victory?" Nicki probed after a while. "Since we've got free days ahead of us, we should make this night something memorable. Don't you think so, guys?"

"Well," Mikael said, grinning. "A small get-together at the usual place when we get back to Trondheim is not a bad idea."

Zachary continued undressing and opted not to join the conversation since he usually didn't participate in any team after parties. At that moment, he was only thinking of getting back to Trondheim quickly to prepare for his trip with Kristin to Bergen the following day. But his teammates had other plans for him.

"Zachary," he heard Mikael call out to him. "This time, you should also attend. We haven't gotten a chance to initiate you properly into the Troll Kids family. So, this is your chance."

"A party!" Zachary mumbled, shaking his head. "That's not for me. Moreover, have you forgotten that I'm below the legal age for entering most bars in Norway? Even if I go with you, I won't be able to enter any night parties with you." He added, sounding defensive.

"Come on, Zachary," Nicki said. "We're not going to bars to drink hard liquor or anything. FYI, we're also professional athletes. We're only going to some other interesting place to celebrate our win and have a get-together before our break. There will be some nice food, a few lighter drinks, and beautiful girls to help us wind down after our hectic schedule this month. You have to come this time around. That'll be a good way for you to relax and bond."

"He'll be there," Zachary heard someone else reply even before he could deliberate the issue. He turned around, intending to confront the person making decisions for him but changed his mind the next instant.

"Coach," Zachary said, locking eyes with Coach Johansen.

"Don't give me that look," Coach Johansen said, grinning. "Since it's a post-match team get-together, it doesn't hurt for you to be there. That way, you'll be able to relax before you head into the break. For your information, I also plan to be there."

Zachary noted that Nicki's expression changed slightly when the coach said he would also be at the post-match get-together. But since the coach was nearby, he let the matter slide and returned to the issue at hand.

"If I attend," he said, "I can only be there for an hour. I've to return home early and prepare for a trip tomorrow."

"That's okay," Coach Johansen said, smiling. "We'll only have a one-hour dinner at the place organized by Mikael when we get to Trondheim. After that, you're free to go anywhere you like."

"Then great," Zachary said, pulling off his boots and stockings. "But won't we arrive in Trondheim very late? For your information, it's already 8:20 PM."

"There's no need to worry," Trond Henriksen, the assistant head coach, chipped in. "Our flight is at exactly 9:15. We shall be in Trondheim by 10:15 PM and have dinner. By 11:30, we should be releasing you to do your own things."

"Please note," Coach Johansen cut in, starting to move around the room. "I'm only fixing this dinner into our schedule so that we can get time to discuss a few relevant issues before heading into the break. That way, we won't have to meet tomorrow or the day after tomorrow. Are we together?"

"Yes, coach," all the players in the dressing room replied, more or less in sync. They seemed to have gained more energy after hearing that the coach would be releasing them for the break that very night.

"Then, that's great," Coach Johansen said, smiling. "Hurry and wash up so that we don't miss our flight back. Remember: the earlier we head back, the sooner we can finish the dinner, and then—you can do our own things. Okay?"

"Yes, coach."

Chapter 199 - Coach Johansen's Advice I

Zachary and his teammates arrived at Værnes Airport in Trondheim on a Scandinavian Airlines flight at exactly 10:05 that night. They went quickly through procedures at the airport, and by 10:20 PM, they were already on a bus back to the city center.

Zachary was in the best of moods as the bus traversed the familiar airport road. He was still soaking in the delightful feeling of scoring a hat-trick to help his team return home with three points at the end of the night.

He felt like singing the Survivor band's hit song — 'Eye of the Tiger' out loud. But he was well aware that his voice wasn't good enough to pull off such a catchy tune without attracting some mockery from his teammates. He could only rock his head from side to side following its beat as it played in the deepest confines of his mind repeatedly.

"So, where will we be having this dinner, Mikael?" Zachary heard Coach Johansen ask as the bus emerged from a tunnel and continued along the road from the airport. The coach was seated closest to the door, in the row right before Zachary's seat. "I hope it's not someplace chaotic. I'm way too old for that." He added, sighing like he was really an old chap.

"Don't worry, coach," Mikael, seated beside Zachary, was quick to reply. "We're heading to a cozy place called Una Pizzeria Bar in Solsiden. There won't be any noise or chaos since we've booked it for the entire night."

"Una Pizzeria Bar," Coach Johansen mumbled as if mulling over the name before turning his head around to look at Mikael. "Is that the place that sells late-night Italian Pizza with drinks?"

"Yes, exactly," Mikael replied. "I selected it because they've got quick service. So, we'll be able to conclude our dinner quickly and then go home to sleep before it's too late."

"Oh," Coach Johansen said, turning back to face the front of the bus. "That should be fine, I guess. Thank you for making the arrangements."

"It's my pleasure," Mikael said. "I hope everyone gets to enjoy the night. That includes you, Zachary." Mikael said, turning towards him.

"I love Pizza," Zachary replied. "So, I'll certainly enjoy the night. Thank you, Mikael."

Thirty minutes later, the whole Rosenborg squad sat in the cozy Una Pizzeria Bar, feasting on good food washed down with drinks. Mikael had gone ahead and invited the players that hadn't been on the match squad as well. So, it was nearly a full-house, with the entire Rosenborg team present at the Pizza bar.

Out of everything going on, Zachary particularly enjoyed eating the pizza.

He ignored the chatter around him and focused on gouging himself with Italian pizza. The match had drained his stamina reserves. So, he was intent on replenishing them before dinner ended. But he made sure to steer clear of alcoholic drinks since he was well aware they could hinder his future growth as a player.

The minutes went by fast as he savored the unique taste of the food, and soon it was time for Coach Johansen to give his address.

"I hope all of you are enjoying the evening," the coach began, standing up and snapping his fingers to draw everyone's attention. "Anyone bored?" He probed, sweeping his gaze across the players.

"No, coach," the players replied, but not in sync.

"The dinner is perfect. We should do this more often..."

"We're only missing the chairman and the sporting director..."

"..."

For the next few seconds, the players responded to Coach Johansen's probing with various answers, some of which were totally off-topic.

"Okay, guys," Coach Johansen said, raising his arm to request silence. "I know that we are all happy after winning the match. But let's quieten down first—so that I can first finish delivering my message to you. We don't want to spend all night here."

The players complied without any questions since it was their coach speaking.

"Starting today, May 25th, until June 18th, we'll be taking a short break," the coach continued after a short pause.

"Yesss, it's a holiday!" One of the players shouted. It seemed he'd lit a fuse among the rest of the souls within the Pizza bar. For the next minute, they clapped their hands and cheered excitedly just because the coach had freed them for the break.

Zachary, though, did not join in. He continued feasting on his pizza since he didn't see the whole point in celebrating the commencement of a break.

Instead of resting, he would have preferred to continue playing matches and training to improve himself using Rosenborg's first-rate facilities. Even when he returned to Lubumbashi in Congo, he planned on doing just that. At the very least, he would train with his old club, TP Mazembe, to keep himself fit and in tip-top shape.

"Quiet," Coach Johansen snapped. He was surprisingly sharp, and the players quietened down immediately. "We don't have all night. So, first, listen." He added, frowning slightly.

"As of right now, we're beginning our short break from competitive football," the coach continued, glancing around. "So, you're free to do whatever you like or go wherever you wish to go—since you'll have no commitments to the team during the break."

"But I expect you to continue leading proper lifestyles befitting professional athletes even during the holiday," the coach emphasized, narrowing his eyes. "Don't ingest any illegal substances. Don't drink excessive alcohol or, if you can, avoid it completely. Continue working out and exercising with the ball on a regular basis."

The coach paused for a moment, taking a hearty sip from a glass of wine. "Do as I say, not as I do," he mumbled, placing his glass back on the table, and the players laughed at that.

"I want you all to remember that there'll be a medical right after the break," he continued after a moment. "Should we find that you're out of shape or you have been doing anything you shouldn't have, you will become an enemy of mine right away. And being an enemy of mine means that you might not see your name on the match squad for the rest of the season. Are we together?"

"Yes, coach."

"Good." Coach Johansen nodded, half-smiling. "I'm glad we're on the same page. But there's one more thing. Even though the official break is up to June 18th, I expect you to return to Trondheim for the official start of team training on the 15th. That is a must for any player that wishes to be part of my starting line-up. Please do not be late. Not even for a single day." The coach's tone had already turned solemn and melted the festive mood in the Una Pizzeria Bar.

"Are we together, guys?" He shouted, glancing around.

"Yes, coach."

"Good, good," Coach Johansen said. "Since we have finished discussing all the important stuff, I guess you can go ahead and enjoy tonight. But only tonight. Don't get too used to just enjoying. Instead, you've got to continue working hard as professional athletes so that you can maintain your fitness over the break. Are we together, lads?"

"Yes, coach," Zachary heard the rest of his teammates reply a bit too enthusiastically, maybe because the coach was nearing the end of his address. It seemed they couldn't wait for him to conclude so that they could go—do their own things, whatever those were.

"Zachary!" Coach Johansen said, turning toward him abruptly. "Can you step out for a minute? I want to talk to you about a few things."

"Oh!" Zachary said, placing down his small chunk of pizza. "I'll be right out. Just a minute." He said, starting to pick up his gym bag.

"Okay, I'll be waiting for you on the balcony," the coach said. He then turned around and started walking out of the room.

Chapter 200 - Coach Johansen's Advice II

"Where are you taking the bag?" Nicki quickly stopped Zachary's actions as soon as the coach had stepped out of the room. "Dinner will continue as soon as you finish talking to the coach. Don't tell me that you're going to trek home at this time. Are you?" He probed, raising a brow.

"I was thinking of calling a taxi cab," Zachary replied. "My one hour that I should be spending on the dinner is almost done. So, I'm thinking of leaving soon."

"You can't leave," three or four voices of his teammates echoed together when they heard his declaration.

"Have you forgotten you didn't get the chance to be properly initiated in the Troll Kid family?" Mikael whispered after moving closer to him. "Tonight is the night. You can't miss it. It'll be fun."

"Oh, okay," Zachary finally agreed, giving in to the peer pressure. He couldn't just brush away all the invites from his teammates. That might sour their impression of him to some extent. So, he decided to brace himself, attend their initiation, whatever that may be, for about an hour, before heading back home—to his apartment.

"Great," Nicki said, patting his shoulder. "First go and hear out the coach. We shall be waiting for you here."

"Okay," Zachary said, placing his bag down—beside his seat. "I'll be back in a moment," he added. He then stepped away from his teammates and walked towards the balcony.

"You took your time," Coach Johansen commented as soon as he arrived. "Are you having fun?"

"Yes," Zachary replied, sighing. "I got held up by the others for a few moments."

"Oh," Coach Johansen said, inclining his head to observe Zachary. "Is anything wrong? Do you need some help?"

"No," Zachary said, shaking his head. "What did you want to talk about?"

Coach Johansen took a step closer towards the rails of the balcony and started observing the streets below. Zachary followed his gaze and noticed that they were nearly empty, with very sparse traffic, since it was already eleven in the night.

"You're heading back to your home country, DR Congo?" Coach Johansen broke the silence after a while.

"Yes," Zachary replied, his gaze still on the streets below.

"When?"

"Most likely, the day after tomorrow."

Coach Johansen turned to his side to observe him once again. "I was looking at the FIFA international timetable this week and noticed that your country is scheduled to play some World Cup qualification matches this month. Do you plan to participate? That's if you get called for international duty, which I'm sure you will."

"If I get called, I'll play, of course," Zachary replied. "But I highly doubt the coaches have already noticed me since the Tippeligaen is not that popular in Africa."

"They must have," Coach Johansen said, smiling a bit. "Otherwise, they are very incompetent at their jobs. Would you like to hear some advice from me before you go and join the international matches?"

"Sure, go ahead," Zachary replied, nodding. Of course, he wouldn't refuse to listen to his coach's advice.

"You know that you have just experienced that growth spurt of yours," Coach Johansen began. "You may think that you've already acclimatized to your new physique because you have played well for over a month at the professional level. But thinking like that would be a mistake on your part."

Coach Johansen started caressing his red beard as he continued. "You must understand that the more competitive matches you play over a short period, the more your muscles wear and tear. This damage to muscles or even bones will accumulate if they don't rest over long periods. And that will lead to certain parts of your body, especially your joints, getting weaker over time. That's what leads to chronic injuries that end careers."

"I guess you must have heard stories of the great player Marco van Basten ending his career at only twenty-eight—because of recurring injuries. If he had taken some time to rest when he was still at the height of his career, maybe he could have avoided it. Are we together, Zachary?"

"Yes, coach," Zachary replied, smiling wryly. Of course, he already knew where the coach was going with his advice.

"So, Zachary," the coach continued, patting his shoulder. "You're only eighteen years old. You're at a stage where you're likely to experience the most growth throughout the entire duration of your career. So, my belief is that you should take this time to train your skills properly and elevate them as much as possible through personalized training. You can first relax on the international duty until you're twenty, or better, twenty-two. By then, you should have already turned into a machine that can handle both international and club duties in a single season. That is if we're going by your current rate of growth. Are we together, Zachary?"

"Yes, coach," Zachary replied. "But what do I say when my country's coach comes knocking on my door?"

"The answer is simple, Zachary," Coach Johansen said, half-smiling. "You've just experienced a growth spurt, and you're at a very high risk of easily getting injured. The club physician has recommended that you keep taking rests of one to two weeks after partaking in highly intensive matches continuously for about a month. You won't be able to participate in the qualifiers. That's the truth and also a good reason to keep you away from international duty for some time."

Zachary could only smile wryly once again on hearing that. He wasn't so patriotic to the point that he wanted to play for his country at all costs. Patriotism was almost extinct in countries like DR Congo. It was just that he enjoyed playing football so much and wanted to play as many competitive games as

possible. The very thought of pitting his skills against new opponents made his blood boil and excited him. In the deepest confines of his mind, he had been hoping to play some matches when he returned home.

"You seem down after hearing my advice," Coach Johansen probed after noticing Zachary's reaction. "Do you really wish to partake in qualifiers? Remember: when you return to Trondheim after the break, there'll be the Tippeligaen, the Norwegian Cup, and then the Europa League qualifiers. Think about this carefully. Do you believe that you can play all these matches without breaking down?"

"Well, I guess I can," Zachary replied in sotto voce. "But, maybe, my efficiency on the field of play would go down."

"Then, let me tell you this," Coach Johansen chimed in, fast. "If you played all those matches, you'll most likely break down before the end of the season. And we don't want that. I don't want that. So, please, consider my advice. Okay?"

"Yes, coach," Zachary replied, nodding. "I'll try to consider it."

"Then, good," the coach said, grinning. "You can go back to the rest of your teammates. If you can, try and relax with them for today. It's a good way to wind down after a hectic month. But remember, no alcohol. It would be best if you avoided it."

"Yes, coach."

"Okay, off you go," he said, shooing him away with a hand gesture. "I wish you a safe journey back home."

"Thanks, coach," Zachary said, smiling.