

Greatest 221

Chapter 221 - An Incredible Start

"ROSENBORG! *Clap*Clap* ROSENBORG! *Clap*Clap..."

Zachary could feel his heart beating hard with excitement as he soaked in the cheers of the Rosenborg fans. He'd already taken his spot in the attacking midfield position and was only waiting for the referee to blow the whistle to signal the kick-off.

"Zachary," he heard Coach Johansen yelling at the top of his lungs from the sidelines. "Don't let that Stefan Johansen become comfortable in the midfield. Try to check him once in a while so that you can throw him off his game."

Zachary gave the coach a thumbs and nodded his head to indicate he'd received the message. He cast a glance across the pitch — towards the other half and noticed the player in question.

Stefan Johansen, the defensive midfielder who'd beaten him to acquire the May player of the month accolade, also seemed to be observing him at that moment. So, their gazes collided for a moment, and Zachary felt an intense urge to battle from him.

But Zachary just smiled before looking away —towards the referee who was preparing to blow the whistle.

He wasn't scared in the slightest by Stefan Johansen's intimidating gaze since he'd grown more confident in his skills over the preceding month. He was no longer intimidated by the players in the Tippeligaen since he knew they would find it hard to keep up with him throughout the 90 minutes of the game. That was even more so after his endurance and stamina attributes had broken through to the S-grading.

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The referee finally blew the whistle at exactly 6:00 PM to signal for the start of the battle between the first and second of the Tippeligaen table.

At that moment, the cheers across Lerkendal rose up a notch to hit a crescendo as Nicki Nielsen kicked the ball back into midfield—towards Zachary.

Zachary sprung into action right away and sprinted forward to meet it before it could reach him. He controlled it mid-sprint and continued his dash towards the other half before the Strømsgodset players could close him down.

A moment later, his heart was already beating with anticipation as he looked up across the field to find a suitable passing option. To his surprise, he noticed that the Strømsgodset players had not yet reached peak concentration. They weren't even trying their best to check the Rosenborg attacking players who were already making runs deep inside their half.

Zachary, of course, wouldn't let such an opportunity to exploit an apparent weakness go to waste. So, without any dilly-dallying, he kicked the ball hard and let loose a raking pass towards the right-wing.

By relying on the Zinedine-Pirlo Mental Juju, coupled with his high-level passing skills, he managed to deliver a teasing pass behind the yet-to-shape-up Strømsgodset midfield.

Tobias Mikkelsen, Rosenborg's right-winger, managed to connect with Zachary's sweet pass just a meter away from the touchline. He fed the ball past Lars Christopher Vilsvik, the Strømsgodset left-back and then beat him for pace.

Tobias raced very fast along the touchline on the right flank and soon began cutting into the pitch. He was on a straight course towards Strømsgodset's goal.

However, the Strømsgodset defenders responded quickly and blocked his sprinting path before he could make it close to their box. They'd managed to react with swiftness befitting the professional players that they were and arrayed themselves into proper defensive shape to counteract the threat from the right-wing.

"Tobias, I'm open here," Zachary yelled at the top of his voice as soon as he noticed that the Rosenborg right-winger was in sort of a bind. He'd also long started making a run into Strømsgodset's half and had even already positioned himself to receive a return pass from Tobias.

On hearing Zachary's yell, Tobias immediately flicked the ball to his right — out of the reach of the outstretched foot of one of Strømsgodset's defenders. Without losing a moment, he looked up and passed the ball back into the middle — towards Zachary's position.

Zachary once again met the ball in motion. He controlled it with a deft first touch, skipping past Stefan Johansen, the Strømsgodset defensive midfielder, in the process. Without delay, he flicked it further forward and unleashed another raking pass to the left wing.

With that teasing pass over the zone of intense rival pressure, he'd switched play within a couple of seconds and managed to catch the Strømsgodset defenders unawares.

He'd already noticed that their defensive line was still in an awkward shape that was skewed to the right. That was because they'd been concentrating their efforts there only a moment prior. So, there were plenty of gaps to exploit on the left flank where Tarik Elyounoussi was lurking.

Tarik Elyounoussi, Rosenborg's left-winger, latched on to Zachary's pin-point pass while under no pressure. He immediately set off on a wavy run towards Strømsgodset box, flowing like the wind.

Before the Strømsgodset defenders could shape up, he unleashed a lofted pass across the mouth of the goal — seemingly intent on finding Nicki Nielsen, Rosenborg's central striker.

However, Adam Kwarasey, the Strømsgodset goalkeeper, managed to get to the ball before Nicki could connect with it. He punched it with an outstretched fist, directing it away from the striker's reach — to the outside of the box.

Zachary immediately adjusted his course slightly after judging that the ball was approaching his general direction. However, he wasn't the only player after the rebound. Aside from him, two other Strømsgodset players were also sprinting on course to intercept it.

Of course, Zachary wouldn't allow them to get to it first. He intended to make the best of the attacking opportunity against the table leaders before they managed to settle down into their game.

So, he upped his speed and shot after the ball, sprinting like a predator on a hunt. With his long strides, he reached it first before leaping high to chest it down onto the ground.

By then, the first one of the two Strømsgodset players was arriving. However, Zachary didn't panic. He made the gentlest of touches on the ball before it could land on the green, sending it just barely over the head of the approaching opponent.

But, the second Strømsgodset player was upon him just as he was circumventing the first one.

Zachary remained calm and composed since he had the initiative. He brought the ball to the ground with swift and seamless motions before slowing down slightly — to draw in the second approaching opponent.

When he noticed that the defender had seemingly relaxed, he accelerated within an instant, leaving him in the dust. He was soon inside the opponent's box.

At that moment, the cheers of the Rosenborg fans rose to new heights. They almost drowned out every other sound around the stadium. But Zachary remained calm and flicked the ball quickly between his left to right foot repeatedly, trying to find a gap to exploit within the box.

Just then, one of the defenders blocking his path to the goal stretched out his leg to tackle the ball from his feet. But that was what he'd been anticipating. He immediately raised his foot and pulled the trigger, unleashing a carpet shot through the defender's legs towards the goal.

At that instant, silence descended across Lerkendal stadium as the ball rolled close to the ground, flashing past several outstretched legs before homing into the bottom left corner.

ROSENBERG BK 1 : STRØMSGODSET IF 0

That was the score showing on the large screen above the stands on one side of Lerkendal Stadion.

In the third minute, Rosenborg had managed to draw first blood against the table leaders.

Lerkendal exploded into a Tsunami of cheers that caused intense vibrations across the entire stadium. The noise was at an astronomical level. It felt like the whole of Trondheim was experiencing an earthquake right after the goal.

Kristin was all smiles as she joined the rest of the fans in the stands to celebrate the lightning-fast goal. At last, her team was well on its way to returning to the top of the table.

She felt her mood lifting as she watched Zachary head to the corner flag before raising both arms in the air like he was hugging the sky. The guy was amusing as ever, even during his goal celebration. She immediately decided his celebrations needed some work if he intended to use them to boost his popularity around Europe. She made a mental note to bring up the issue when they next ran into each other.

"Well, that was unexpected," she heard Anne Rimmen, the commentator, say after the cheering had started dying down. Her voice was loud and clear through the stadium's loudspeakers.

"It's just the third minute," she continued, "But Zachary Bemba, the Rosenborg number-33, has already managed to score the first goal. The young midfielder even seems sharper than he was last month. What's your take on this, Harald?"

"Well," Harald Brattbakk, the pundit of the day, said. "From that one attack, I can already tell that Zachary Bemba is much more lethal than he was during the Tippeligaen matches in May. He initiated the whole chain of attacks by switching play and linking up with the wingers. He then ended the attack by taking that shot through the legs of a couple of defenders."

"Moreover, we cannot forget that deft second touch, just as he was about to loop the ball over the defender," the pundit continued. "For me, that was magic, and it was the defining moment that made me realize that the young prodigy has improved yet again."

"Now that Rosenborg has scored, do you think Strømsgodset still has a chance to turn this around?" Anne Rimmen, the commentator, inquired.

"That, I can't predict," Harald was quick to reply. "We all know that Rosenborg's is strong up front, for sure. They've got the likes of Nicki, Tarik, and above all, Zachary Bemba launching and handling their attacks. That's why Rosenborg has averaged above two goals during the previous month."

"But that aside, the team also concedes many goals," he continued. "Over and over again, we've seen the Troll Kids take the lead in the first half and then come close to losing it during the second half. So, winning or losing will depend on whether the Rosenborg defense can shape up — and make sure Strømsgodset doesn't score. Otherwise, Zachary and co will have to score at the very least four goals to win against the table leaders from Drammen."

Chapter 222 - An Impeccable Execution Of The Game Plan I

The match restarted with the sound of the referee's whistle. Strømsgodset's kicked off proceedings following Rosenborg's goal celebrations.

Kristin grew more confused as she watched the Rosenborg players gradually settle back into their half and concentrate all their efforts on defense. They were obviously the stronger team and had the initiative since they were one goal ahead. But to her dismay, they let the Strømsgodset players continue attacking them like they were the weaker team for the next twenty minutes. They were clearly following Mourinho's infamous tactic of 'parking the bus' — which the 'special one' had employed against Ronaldinho's Barcelona. It was the sort of football Kristin did not enjoy.

"It seems Coach Johansen has directed his players to focus on defense while remaining compact as a team," she heard Anne Rimmen, the commentator, say. "The Troll Kids are now playing with nine men in front of the goal whenever they're without possession."

"Only Nicki Nielsen, the number-9, is staying forward waiting for an opportunity to counterattack. However, he has barely gotten on the ball since all the action is taking place in Rosenborg's half."

"What a strange tactical approach we're seeing from Coach Johansen, despite his team having a more versatile squad!" She continued. "It seems he's letting the opponents dictate the tempo! Harald, please enlighten us. What's your take on Coach Johansen's defensive strategy?"

"Well," Harald, the pundit for the day, said after clearing his voice. "Coach Johansen is intent on emerging out of this fixture with the three points to take his team to the top of the table. But to achieve that, he has to tackle the problem of his team conceding needless goals. What we're seeing on the pitch at the moment is his solution to the problem."

"By focusing on defense, his players have managed to weather Strømsgodset's constant barrage of attacks without conceding for the past twenty minutes. That probably wouldn't have been the case if most of his players moved forward to attack as usual. That would have left gaps in the defense, possibly allowing the boys from Drammen to score."

"If the Rosenborg players manage to maintain their focus and discipline throughout the game," he continued, "then they'll surely emerge as victors. It won't even matter if they don't score another goal."

"Let's wait and see how the match develops," Anne Rimmen said in her vibrant voice. "But for now, it's Strømsgodset dictating the proceedings on the field of play. Stefan Johansen, the May player of the month, has just received the ball in defensive midfield. He drives forward, trying to penetrate Rosenborg's half for the umpteenth time during the first half. But, oh my! He has met a roadblock in the form of Zachary Bemba, the young Rosenborg number-33..."

Kristin's whole attention was on the field of play at that moment. She watched with undivided attention as Zachary closed down on Stefan Johansen quickly — and slid in to tackle the ball off his feet. She couldn't help but wince since she thought that he'd committed a foul. His tackle seemed on the verge of being reckless. She assumed that he was perhaps starting to get frustrated by Rosenborg's continuous lack of possession.

But a moment later, she let out a pent-up breath and relaxed. The referee had not blown his whistle, meaning Zachary had either not committed a foul or escaped the penalty.

Her heart began racing as she watched Zachary pick himself from the ground with the swiftness of a cheetah. Without wasting a second, the young Maestro quickly unleashed a through-pass to the right-wing — seemingly to no one in particular.

"Oh, my!" She heard Anne Rimmen, the commentator, yell as the cheering rose to new heights all around Lerkendal. "Zachary Bemba has initiated a Rosenborg counterattack after successfully dispossessing Stefan Johansen, the Strømsgodset defensive midfielder. Tobias Mikkelsen, Rosenborg's right-winger, manages to connect with Zachary's through pass on the right flank. His pace is incredible. It's Rosenborg on the counter..."

Kristin could not help but jump up from her seat as she heard the commentary. She could not remain seated since the Rosenborg fans in the row in front of hers were already on their feet, craning their necks to get a clearer view of the counterattack. She had to follow suit to avoid missing the first captivating gameplay from Rosenborg in over twenty minutes.

"Oh, my goodness! Tobias Mikkelsen manages to skip past Jarl André Storbaek's sliding tackle. He's dashing along the touchline and spearing deeper into Strømsgodset's half."

Anne Rimmen, the commentator, continued describing the thrilling action on the field of play. Kristin watched Tobias bolting along the touchline with the ball with a hundred percent focus. He seemed intent on keeping the Rosenborg counterattack alive. However, just as he'd started cutting into the pitch — heading towards the box, he was closed down by Jørgen Horn, the Strømsgodset center back in shirt number-5.

However, Tobias didn't try to dribble past the tall defender. Instead, he passed the ball towards the middle to find Nicki Nielsen, the Rosenborg center forward, who'd long escaped from his marker.

Nicki received the ball mid-sprint, skipping past a sliding tackle by Abdisalam Ibrahim, the Strømsgodset midfielder, who had tracked back to defend. Without a pause, the number-9 unleashed a backheel pass back into the midfield before any other opponents could surround him.

The center-forward had passed the ball without looking. That evoked a wave of excited cheers from the fans around Kristin. But she didn't join in on the excitement since all her attention was still on the field of play.

Zachary met Nicki's backheel pass without slowing down in the slightest. He didn't even attempt to control the ball. Instead, he simply kicked it into space — just behind the Strømsgodset defensive line on the right flank. Once again, it looked like he was passing to no one in particular.

But a moment later, Kristin saw Tobias Mikkelsen dash past Jørgen Horn, the Strømsgodset center back, and connect with Zachary's well-timed pass. Without wasting a second, the right-winger bolted into the box and let loose a right-footed shot that homed into the top right corner. It was a close call. The effort had just barely sailed past the outstretched hand of the goalkeeper.

"GOAAAAAAL...."

Kristin shouted along with the rest of the fans as they celebrated Rosenborg's second goal. Her heart was racing just from the memory of the lightning-fast counterattack. The way Zachary, Tobias, and Nicki had linked up to create the goal was magical.

Chapter 223 - An Impeccable Execution Of The Game Plan II

"Oh, my, what an electrifying counterattack from the Rosenborg players," Kristin heard Anne Rimmen, the commentator, say as the cheers started to die down. "Just in the 31st minute, it's Rosenborg 2 Strømsgodset 0. I'm at a loss for words. Harald! What's your take on this goal?"

"That attack was the true definition of perfect attacking chemistry in football," Harald said, his voice animated. "Not a single moment was wasted by any of the three attacking Rosenborg players during the counterattack. It was Zachary to Tobias, and then Tobias to Nicki. Then Nicki performed that backheel to Zachary—and then the young number-33 immediately set loose Tobias with a perfectly-timed pass, sending him well on his way to score."

"Moreover, the whole counterattack didn't last longer than eleven seconds," the pundit continued, his voice lowering. "To me, this is Rosenborg at its best. I can see this team going on to become champions if they maintain this form after today's game."

"Let me take you back for a bit, Harald," Anne Rimmen, the commentator, chipped in. "Do you think Zachary's initial tackle on Stefan Johansen, the Strømsgodset defensive midfielder, was a foul?"

"I don't think so," Harald was quick to reply in a confident tone. "From the replay, you can easily see that Zachary managed to make contact with the ball first — before sweeping Stefan Johansen. That's not a foul in my book. Moreover, the referee was positioned right behind them. I believe he would have immediately blown the whistle if there was any foul play."

"That explains everything then," Anne Rimmen said. "For a moment there, I thought it was a foul. I guess we'll look more into it at the end of the game. For now, let's take you back to the live-action."

Coach Johansen was all smiles as he watched his team finish the first half after executing his game plan to perfection. The shift from attacking to a defensive mindset had enhanced the concentration of his players considerably. They had remained focused, not even allowing the Strømsgodset players a single shot on goal. His mind had been at peace throughout the entire first half. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been so relaxed while watching his team playing an official game.

However, he was well aware his players still needed to do a lot more work to win the game and secure the three points they needed to get to the top of the table. There were still 45 minutes of play remaining. That worried him since his team had recently been susceptible to conceding needlessly during those tricky minutes of the second half.

So, during his halftime address, he repeatedly urged the players to stay focused and continue following the game plan. He only sent them back to the pitch for the second half after making sure he'd drilled the message into their heads. But he was still a little worried since he was well aware that the root cause of the issue was the shortage of defenders on the team. Moreover, Tore Reginiussen, his captain—and first-choice center back, was still on suspension. That left him with limited defensive options.

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The referee blew the whistle and the second half commenced with Strømsgodset's kick-off. The boys from Drammen were on fire from the first minute after the break. They arrayed themselves in a 4-3-3 attacking formation to launch waves of attacks on Rosenborg's box.

On a few occasions, they almost managed to score. However, the Rosenborg players kept their composure and averted all threats without conceding.

Stefan Johansen, Strømsgodset's defensive midfielder, was on fire. He worked very hard and kept on releasing defense-splitting passes to the back of Rosenborg's defensive line whenever he got the chance.

If it wasn't for Zachary, who stayed hot on his heels and kept him in check, Coach Johansen was sure the midfielder would have caused a lot more trouble for his team.

What surprised Coach Johansen the most was Zachary's insane work rate. The young Maestro had been making runs all over the pitch. He'd even made several tackles in both the attacking and defensive midfield, winning the ball plenty of times. However, he didn't seem the least bit out of breath as the game approached the 75th minute.

"Has Zachary hired any professional personal trainer over the previous month?" He asked Trond Henriksen, the assistant head coach of Rosenborg, who was standing beside him.

"I don't think so," Coach Henriksen replied, shaking his head. "He only trains with Coach Bjørn Peters from the academy once in a while. Why do you ask?"

"His work rate has gone up considerably after the break," Coach Johansen replied, sighing. "For a moment, I thought he was on a specialized training regimen to increase his stamina and endurance."

"Even if he were on such a kind of regimen, his endurance would still take long to improve," Coach Henriksen said. "My guess is that he's in a period of rapid development as an athlete. And that's very good for us since he'll be able to play many more matches."

"That might be the case," Coach Johansen replied, his eyes still following the proceedings on the pitch.

His players had just averted another Strømsgodset attack without incurring any damage. They weren't conceding since they'd stayed true to the game plan even as the game entered the last twelve minutes. But, that had come at the cost of weakening the attacking prowess of his team.

"We need to bring in a few defenders to stabilize the squad during the mid-season transfer window," Coach Johansen said, lowering his voice.

"Careful," Trond Henriksen said quickly to interrupt him. "The cameras are always focused on you during matches. You may give away needless gossip to the journalists if they manage to read your lips."

"Oh," Coach Johansen said, caressing his red beard. "But I haven't said anything wrong or harmful to the team. It's what we intend to do."

"You're right," Coach Henriksen said, nodding. "But we can discuss this after the game. By then, we should be at the top of the table. I believe the management won't give us any hard time if we wish to sign a few more players."

"Good," Coach Johansen said, glancing at his watch. It was already the 81st minute. So, he decided to make a couple of substitutions to give a boost to his counterattacking options. He still needed one more goal to seal the lips of all the doubters who were comparing Rosenborg to other teams in Norway. Slaughtering the table leaders by three or more goals would shut them up for sure.

"Tell Borek and John to start warming up," he said to the assistant head coach. "I want them on the pitch within five minutes at most."

"Oh," Coach Henriksen said, raising a brow. "Who are they replacing?"

"They'll go in for Tobias and Tarik, our two wingers," Coach Johansen replied, his gaze still fixed on the field of play. "They're almost out of stamina since they've been running back and forth across the wings. That's why our counters over the last few minutes have been failing to produce any results."

"That's a good call," Coach Trond said, smiling. "I'll tell them to hurry and warm up."

Chapter 224 - An Impeccable Execution Of The Game Plan III

Zachary glanced up at the digital clock on the big stadium screen and noticed it was already the 85th minute.

He had a few seconds of rest from the intensive action while waiting for Str?msgodset to take a throw-in. That was right after Mikael Dorsin, the Rosenborg acting captain, intercepted another Str?msgodset attack through the right-wing to send the ball out of play with a sliding tackle.

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It was then the referee blew the whistle and signaled for a substitution.

Zachary immediately glanced towards the sidelines and noticed that both John Chibuike and Borek Dockal were on the touchline waiting to enter the field of play. For a moment, he could not help but frown, thinking that the coach was about to substitute him out of the game.

But a moment later, when the fourth official raised the substitution board, a smile returned to his face as he instantly relaxed. Tobias Mikkelsen and Tarik Elyounoussi, the two wingers, were the ones to give way to the two substitutes.

He was glad the coach had chosen to keep him on since he wasn't feeling tired even after playing 85 minutes of intense football. He was certain he still had a lot to give on the pitch. That was especially so since both his stamina and endurance attributes had made a breakthrough to the S-grading.

"Zachary," he heard Borek Dockal, the first substitute, call out to him just as he was making his way towards the left-wing to defend against the throw-in.

"Yes, Borek," he replied, braking instantly to hear out his teammate.

"The coach has a message for you," Borek said, smiling. "He wants you to have a few moments of rest by playing as a winger on the left flank. He says that you can only do that while away from the midfield."

"Oh," Zachary said, raising a brow and looking towards the Rosenborg technical area. He could indeed see that Coach Johansen was busy gesturing for him to take up the position on the left flank.

"And who is going to play my number in the attacking midfield if I switch?" He asked, looking away from the sidelines and returning his focus to Borek.

"Me," Borek replied, pointing at himself and smiling. "Before I forget, the coach also mentioned that you should try to use your pace to break through the wing. He says the Strømsgodset players on the flanks are starting to look fatigued. So, if you play your cards right there, you'll most likely create another goal-scoring opportunity for us."

"Oh, okay," Zachary replied, letting out a breath. Without another word, he trekked away from Borek and moved closer to the left touchline to take up his new position.

At the bottom of his heart, he wasn't happy with the Coach's instructions. He didn't like leaving his position in the midfield — not even for a single minute. He feared the coach would start to routinely consider placing him in the wing if he played well there. He couldn't have that happening to him in the future.

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The referee blew the whistle, signaling for the Strømsgodset players to take the throw-in right after John Chibuike, Rosenborg's second substitute, took up his position on the field of play.

Zachary immediately forgot all his displeasure and returned all his focus to the game. It was as if all the other thoughts had disappeared, leaving him in a trance and ready to defend against the Strømsgodset throw-in. Without wasting a second, he marked Adama Diomande, Strømsgodset's right-winger, who was the player closest to him.

Lars Vilsvik, the Strømsgodset right-back, did not waste time after hearing the referees whistle. He immediately made a long throw — towards Rosenborg's box where Péter Kovács and Gustav Wikheim, the two Strømsgodset attacking players, were lurking.

Péter Kovács, their center-forward, immediately jumped high to meet the ball after having outmaneuvered Stefan Strandberg, the Rosenborg center-back. He chested the ball, bringing it under control before flicking it to Gustav Wikheim, his attacking counterpart.

Gustav Wikheim didn't hesitate in the slightest when he received it. He immediately let loose a missile of a shot towards the Rosenborg goal from just outside the box.

It was the first decent shot on goal from the Strømsgodset players in over ten minutes of gameplay. However, Daniel Rørlund, the highly experienced Rosenborg goalkeeper, made an incredible leaping save, pushing the ball out of the field of play.

The referee blew his whistle right away and pointed to the corner flag.

Zachary immediately started making his way back to the box to defend against the corner kick. But just as he'd taken a few steps, he heard Coach Johansen yelling.

"Zachary," the coach hollered out to him. "You don't need to head back into the box to defend. Stay put and open in the left-wing. I want you ready to initiate a counterattack in case there is an opportunity."

Zachary immediately gave the coach a thumbs up before making his way back to the left flank. However, a moment later, he noticed that Abdisalam Ibrahim, one of the Strømsgodset midfielders, had followed him there.

"Do you really believe we'll leave you alone and unmarked even though it's us taking the corner?" the midfielder asked as he approached his position. "If you're hoping for a counter, forget it since I'm here now."

"So, don't you want to score?" Zachary asked, stepping away from the defender who was already standing too close to him.

"Of course we do," the midfielder replied, "but we don't want to concede either." He stepped closer to Zachary once again, seemingly intent on denying him even an inch of space on the field of play.

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It was then that the referee blew the whistle, signaling for Str?msgodset to take the corner. Jarl André Storbaek, the left-back, immediately took it, floating a teasing ball into the crowded Rosenborg box.

Péter Kovács, the Str?msgodset center-forward, reacted quickly to meet it. He escaped from his mark and leaped high to plant a header towards the top right corner from around the edge of the box.

Zachary winced slightly despite himself as he watched the ball sail past the goalkeeper's outstretched hands. He could even hear a momentary silence descend upon Lerkendal. The ball looked to be on a straight course to the back of the net.

But luckily, it seemed to change its course at the last moment, smashing off the crossbar and bouncing back into the crowded box. However, the danger had not yet passed.

Panic welled up within Zachary as he watched Adama Diomande, Str?msgodset's right forward, pounce on the rebound ball and poke it back towards goal with an outstretched boot.

But once again, Daniel ?rlund, the experienced number-1, came to the rescue. He committed himself fully, making a diving save that denied Str?msgodset the chance to score once more.

"Daniel, Daniel, pass here quickly..."

Zachary started running away from his mark, yelling for the ball, after seeing the goalkeeper make the save.

The experienced goalkeeper sprung up from the ground with the agility of a cat that'd just caught the scent of catnip. Without wasting time, he then raced to the edge of the box before making a powerful one-handed throw towards space in the left-wing before the opponents could react.

Zachary accelerated in an instant and shrugged off Abdissalam Ibrahim, the Strømsgodset midfielder, who'd already caught up to him once more.

Heart thumping hard as adrenaline coursed through his system, he connected with Daniel Rønlund's long throw just as it was about to head out of play. From there, he didn't look back as his long strides consumed yards of space along the left touchline within seconds.

The Rosenborg counterattack was on once again.

A Strømsgodset defender came to close down Zachary soon after. However, he didn't lose his cool since he'd already grown accustomed to the pace of the Tippeligaen football over the preceding month.

After taking in the posture of the defender, he slowed down slightly before pulling the ball towards himself with the inside of his right boot. He looked like he was about to take the left side and continue dashing across the touchline. But a moment later, he pushed the ball away from himself and flicked it through the approaching defender's legs with the outside of his boot to initiate an elastico dribble variant.

The defender did not expect the seamless and almost instantaneous flip-flap play from Zachary. So, he landed on his butt, seemingly still confused by what had just transpired.

Zachary didn't give the defender any further attention and kept running. At one point, he somehow skipped past two simultaneous challenges from a pair of Strømsgodset defenders, emerging with the ball still in his possession. Unbelievably, seconds after leaving his half, he found himself bearing down on goal as the cheers in Lerkendal rose to thunderous heights.

A deft touch took him past the final defender before he expertly looped the ball over the keeper from around the edge of the box to seal the deal. Without halting, he continued to the corner flag to celebrate Roseborg's 3rd goal.

Chapter 225 - Winning By A Landslide

Rosenborg BK 3: Strømsgodset IF 0

Coach Johansen nodded to himself in satisfaction after glancing at the score on the stadium's jumbotron. His mood had lightened after his team managed to solidify their lead in the 87th minute of gameplay.

He was satisfied with Zachary's quick reaction that enabled him to escape his minder and connect with Daniel Rønlund's long throw.

The prodigy was as sharp as ever and had clearly made some improvements over the short break. Even in the final minutes of an intense game, he'd managed to make a captivating solo run and score without running out of stamina. He was growing at an incredible pace as a professional footballer.

"Zachary could easily turn into a great player in the wings if we play him there," he heard Trond Henriksen, the assistant head coach, remark from beside him. "That will give us a lot more options up front. Don't you think so?"

"Yeah, he was also good on the flanks during his academy days," Coach Johansen replied, nodding. "But the problem is that he doesn't want to change his position from the midfield. So, we can't begin considering him as a potential wing player."

"Oh, that's too bad, then," Coach Henriksen said, sighing. "Then, why did you switch him to the flank just now? Aren't you worried that he will be dissatisfied with the team?"

"I won't force him to play the wing if he doesn't want to," Coach Johansen replied, half smiling. "For this game, I only wanted to demonstrate to him the possibilities that could open up if he agreed to play on the wings. Maybe, after scoring, he'll fall in love with the position and ask us to play him there regularly."

Coach Trond Henriksen could only smile, shaking his head on hearing that.

The match restarted right after Rosenborg's goal celebrations.

Zachary immediately noticed that the concentration of the Strømsgodset players had dipped after conceding the 3rd goal. They started making a lot of amateur mistakes and lost the ball to Rosenborg on several occasions. As a result, their attacking threat level reduced considerably as the match progressed into stoppage time.

Zachary and his teammates didn't miss out on the chance to capitalize on the laxity of their opponents. They began playing more boldly and quickly dictated the tempo for the first time since the start of the game.

In the 90th minute, just as the fourth official was raising the board to indicate the number of stoppage-time minutes added, Rosenborg got another opportunity.

Mike Jensen, the defensive midfielder, dispossessed Abdisalam Ibrahim, one of Strømsgodset's midfielders, at the border of the middle third. He wasted no time in unleashing a long-range defense splitting pass which found Nicki Nielsen.

The Rosenborg number nine did not let the pass go to waste. He brought the ball under control with his chest while holding off two Strømsgodset defenders with his incredible physique.

However, the defenders were already frustrated after conceding three goals. They didn't allow Nicki to have his way. They collided into his back and denied him space to maneuver the ball. He could only pass to John Chibuike, who was open on the right flank, to avoid losing possession.

John Chibuike, the substitute who'd come on as a right-winger for Tobias Mikkelsen, looked full of energy as he met Nicki's pass. He controlled the ball mid-sprint and continued spearing deeper into Strømsgodset's half.

He soon started cutting into the middle, heading straight for Strømsgodset's goal. However, a few seconds later, just as he was a few yards from the box, he ran into a reckless sliding challenge from Jarl André Storbaek, the Strømsgodset number-5.

FWEEEEEEE

The referee blew the whistle right away and awarded a free kick to Rosenborg in a position just a few yards away from the edge of the box. He also showed a yellow card to the center-back and immediately started to organize the wall.

"Zachary," Coach Johansen shouted from the sidelines. "Make sure you test the keeper. I'm counting on you to hit the target."

Zachary gave the coach an okay sign with his thumb before picking up the ball and placing it on the green. He took a few steps back and activated the Dead-Ball-Specialist Juju while observing the situation in the box.

The next second, he entered a state of extreme focus, and all the noise around the stadium disappeared. He noticed several gaps in the defense that he could exploit, which he hadn't managed to spot a moment prior. Thus, he was full of confidence as he prepared to take the free kick.

FWEEEEEEE

The referee blew the whistle after organizing the wall and making sure the players were not involved in any foul play.

Zachary immediately made a short angled run towards the ball before smashing it with the inside of his boot to unleash a curling shot towards the top-left corner. The whole process of taking the free-kick felt trivial since he'd practiced the Bend-it-like-Beckham routine more than ten thousand times over the

course of the previous two years. So, he was confident he'd hit the target even before the ball could sail over the wall.

"There it is again," Kristin heard Anne Rimmen, the commentator say, as she watched the ball soar over the wall and dip slightly to home in on the top left corner.

"GOAAAAAL," the commentator continued the next moment as the cheering rose to a thunderous crescendo across Lerkendal. "It's Zachary Bemba with another perfect curveball over the wall to beat the goalkeeper. The young Rosenberg midfielder has managed to bag the second hat-trick of his career with his textbook-perfect set-piece technique. What a night for the young player."

"In the 91st minute, it's Rosenberg 4, Strømsgodset 0. I was expecting a thriller between the first and second on the table. But the match has turned into a one-sided affair. The Troll Kids are at their best today and have totally torn apart the team from Drammen. Harald! What is your take on this unusual score?"

"Well," Harald, the pundit for the day, chimed in. "As I said earlier, Rosenberg has the most lethal attacking force in the whole Tippeligaen. On their starting line-up, they have Zachary, Nicki, Tobias, and the list goes on—and on. All these are phenomenal attackers capable of bagging goals at any moment during a game if you give them any chance. That's the very reason they have managed to score four goals against the former table leaders."

"But what was out of my expectations is Rosenberg not conceding any goals during this match," the pundit continued. "For this, I have to commend Coach Johansen for totally altering his tactics and switching to a defensive-minded 4-2-3-1 formation. He really made an excellent gamble. With the shift to a defensive mindset, he has managed to solve the imbalance between his forward and defensive players. As a result, his team has managed to keep a clean sheet while also allowing his highly clinical attackers to go on a counterattacking rampage against Strømsgodset."

"Thank you for your analysis, Harald," Anne Rimmen chipped in. "We'll continue the discussion in a couple of minutes after the end of the match. But for now, let's first take you to the live-action which has just recommenced after Rosenberg's fourth goal celebrations."

Rosenborg managed to hold on to the 4:0 lead until the end of the game. They remained solid at the back throughout stoppage time and didn't let the Strømsgodset attackers make any goal attempts.

After the final whistle, Zachary received the match ball from the referee since he'd scored his second career hat-trick. He then made his way to the area designated for the press. There, he found his old friend Olav Brusveen, the TV2 Sporten reporter, eagerly waiting to interview him.

"Welcome back, Zachary," Olav said, smiling and holding the microphone out to him right after he'd stepped in front of the cameras.

"Thank you, Olav," Zachary replied, smiling back at him.

"You're the man of the match again, Zachary," he said, maintaining a smile. "Your performance during the match was beyond even my wildest imaginations. You scored yet another hat-trick, taking your tally for the season to eleven goals. You're finally at the summit of the list of top scorers for this season. How do you feel, Zachary?"

"Terrific, of course," Zachary responded matter-of-factly. "But I'm more thrilled by the fact that my team, Rosenborg, has returned to its rightful place at the top of the table."

Olav raised a brow on hearing that. "Right place at the top of the table, you say! Could that imply that you're sure that Rosenborg will go on to maintain the number one position and become the champions at the end of the season?"

"Well," Zachary said, taking a moment to sort out his words. "Since we're finally back to the top, other teams will find it very hard to surpass us in points for the rest of the season. Every Rosenborg player is highly motivated to win more matches and help the team emerge as the overall champion at the end of the season."

"Let's talk more about today's game, Zachary," Olav chimed in. "Your second goal from the solo run was simply out of this world. That was some world-class brilliance on the ball you showcased there. Can you tell us what was going on inside your mind during those few seconds?"

"Well, I was only thinking of creating a goal-scoring opportunity for my team at that moment. Nothing else was on my mind. So, I just kept running and circumventing obstacles until I found myself one-on-one with the keeper and then scored. It was as simple as that."

"Oh," Olav said, nodding. "You're an incredible player, Zachary. Congratulations upon your incredible performance, and I wish you the best." He said, ending the post-match interview.

Chapter 226 - July Player Of The Month

Winning against Strømsgodset Toppfotball, who had been table leaders, by a landslide boosted the morale of the entire Rosenborg team. It was as if the Troll Kids had finally acquired the wings to fly off and leave the rest of the teams in the dust. All the players were highly motivated and performed like monsters whenever they got the chance to be on the starting line-up for an official game.

They began by walloping Levanger Fotballklubb in a Norwegian Cup away fixture 5:1 on Tuesday, June 25th. It was another thrilling game where Zachary contributed a brace, converting two set-pieces during the second half. Nicki Nielsen, Tobias Mikkelsen, and Ole Selnes netted the other goals to send Rosenborg well on its way to the Round-of-Sixteen in the Cupen.

The Sunday after that, on June 30th, Rosenborg faced off against Viking Fotballklubb in another away fixture at the SR-Bank Arena in Stavanger. The match was a slow-paced one that remained goalless until the 65th minute. Borek Dockal scored the first goal on a successful counterattack after receiving an assist from Zachary. Six minutes later, Nicki Nielsen, the Rosenborg number-9, scored the second to ensure that Rosenborg returned with the three points to Trondheim that night.

The following Wednesday evening, on July 3rd, the Rosenborg players finally returned to Lerkendal, their home ground, to face off against Tromsø Idrettslag in the Norwegian Cup Round-of-Sixteen. Coach Johansen benched both Zachary and Nicki Nielsen to give them some rest. But the Troll Kids still put up an incredible defense-minded performance to defeat the boys from the North 1:0 — even with their star attackers absent.

The fans were growing more exhilarated by the ridiculous form of Rosenborg by the day. As a result, Lerkendal Stadion was packed to the brim for Rosenborg's Tippeligaen fixture against Lillestrøm Sportsklubb on the evening of Sunday, July 7th.

In front of the eyes of 21,450 fans, Zachary and his teammates played another thrilling match that impassioned the ecstatic fans further. They successfully hit Lillestrøm Sportsklubb on the counter thrice to score three goals and emerge as victors at the end of the night.

Zachary was as brilliant as ever and scored two goals in the first half — one on a counter and another on a set-piece. With that performance, he took his tally to 13 goals for the season. John Chibuike, the striker from Nigeria, netted the third to kill off all Lillestrøm's chances of making a comeback later in the second half. After that, the Rosenborg players continued playing defensively to keep the score goalless and secure the three points.

The win helped them extend their lead at the top of the table to five points since Strømsgodset had lost yet another game against Fotballklubben Haugesund the day before.

So, the players were even more motivated as they headed into the next fixture at home against Odds Ballklubb scheduled for Sunday, July 14th. They ended up thrashing the team from Skien 4:2, further sealing their position at the top of the table after Strømsgodset lost a second consecutive game.

Zachary scored another goal from a set-piece and provided two assists in the game against Odds Ballklubb. With fourteen goals in the Tippeligaen and three in the Cupen, he was close to sealing his position as the undisputed top scorer in all competitions.

So there was a lot of hype and speculations about him in the news. Some newspapers were even reporting with a hundred percent certainty that he was about to leave Rosenborg and head to greener pastures. However, Zachary ignored the rumors and focused solely on football.

He didn't let the fame get to his head and continued training with a hundred percent focus with the sole aim of improving his core skills as fast as possible. He would only relax from his tight schedule on the rare evenings he spent in Camilla's company. He devoted the rest of his time to football.

Another Tippeligaen match day for Rosenborg arrived on the evening of Sunday, July 28th, after a two-week international break. The Troll Kids continued their fine form and thrashed Sportsklubben Brann 5:0 despite playing at an away ground.

The walloping started in the 6th minute when Zachary created space in the midfield and unleashed one of his signature through-passes to Nicki Nielsen. The Rosenborg number-9 didn't disappoint and connected with Zachary's sweet pass, producing a fine finish to give Rosenborg their first goal.

Soon after, Zachary converted yet another set-piece and scored the second, taking his Tippeligaen tally to 15 goals. As a result, he forced the SK Brann players to come out of their defensive-minded shell and launch a series of attacks, hoping to make a comeback. But that left gaps in their defensive shape — which Zachary and co exploited to score three more goals and extend their winning streak to fourteen matches.

The day after the SK Brann match, Zachary woke up late because he was fatigued. He immediately started going through his morning yoga exercises to quicken his post-match recovery. But just a few minutes into the routine, he heard his phone vibrate on a nearby table, where he'd placed it before the session.

Of course, he didn't halt his practice to check his phone. He continued going through yoga poses for a few more minutes until he was sure he'd completed the entire exercise perfectly. By then, he could feel his tired and tense muscles begin to relax. So, he was in a good mood as he picked his phone from the table to glance at the screen.

There were a couple of unread messages. Zachary perused through them all quickly until his eyes rested on the latest one.

'Mr. Zachary Bemba,' he started reading the text message. 'Congratulations upon your incredible performance during the July Tippeligaen matches. You have been selected as the July Player of the Month by the Tippeligaen coaches, captains, and the media. You can choose any of the following ways to collect your bronze statuette.

- 1) We can send it directly to your team's mailing address.

2) We can present it to you before the first Rosenborg home game for the month of August.

3) You can decide to pick it up at the headquarters of Norsk Toppfotball (NTF) in Oslo, Norway.

You can call all reply to us by text on this number to inform us about your decision within a maximum of three days. Congratulations once again upon winning your first player of the month accolade. We wish you a successful career.

Cheers

Norsk Toppfotball'

"DING"

A system notification sounded within Zachary's mind right after he'd finished reading through the message from Norsk Toppfotball.

"Congratulations to the user on completing a hidden system mission," the AI's apathetic voice followed immediately after. "For the first time, the user has won the best player of the month accolade. That implies the user has finally gotten recognition for his football skills from his peers and the authority that governs the Norwegian professional football league. For that, the system has awarded the user 2000 Juju points. The user needs to keep working hard to win more awards. The more awards the user collects, the higher his chances of making it to the list of players with the potential to become the G.O.A.T."

"Oh, my!" Zachary mumbled, feeling his heart starting to beat faster. He was gleeful after earning the first true accolade in his professional career spanning two lifetimes. Nevertheless, he managed to calm himself before replying to the text message.

He'd already decided to receive his prize right before the next Rosenborg home game since that would help grow his popularity with the fans. So, he sent the reply text to the indicated number and placed his smartphone back on the table. Without further ado, he started making his way to the bathroom to take a shower.

But just as he'd taken a few steps, his phone vibrated once again. When he picked it up and glanced at the screen, he couldn't help but do a double-take. It was one of those rare calls from Coach Johansen.

"Hello, coach," he said, placing the phone close to his ear after accepting the call. "How's your morning?"

"My morning is fine, Zachary," the Coach replied from the other end of the line in his deep husky voice. "How's yours?"

"Fine, coach. I'm just trying to recover from yesterday's post-match fatigue as quickly as possible."

"That's good," Coach Johansen said. "Did you get any text from Norsk Toppfotball today?"

"Yes, coach. I just received a message a few minutes ago. It was about me being the July player of the month. How did you get to know this, coach? I haven't informed anyone yet."

"I have my sources, Zachary," Coach Johansen replied in a relaxed tone. "But that aside, congratulations. I'm happy for you, Zachary, and I hope you go on to win more accolades throughout your career."

"Thank you, coach," Zachary replied, tone humble.

"That aside, can you come and see me in my office," Coach Johansen said after a moment. "I need to talk to you about something."

'Here it comes,' Zachary thought but said: "What time should I come to your office, coach?"

"Come at eleven," Coach Johansen replied. "Will you be able to make it here by then?"

"Yes, I'll make it," Zachary replied.

"Good," Coach Johansen said. "See you in two and a half hours then." He then ended the call without another word.

Chapter 227 - Coach Johansen's Worries

Coach Johansen could not help but sigh, shaking his head after ending his call with Zachary. He was happy that one of his players had finally won the heavily contested player of the month accolade. However, he was also bothered by the attention Zachary had started garnering from all around Europe.

The young Maestro had been on fire since his debut. He'd been instrumental in Rosenborg's winning streak of fourteen matches. Thanks to his incredible form and consistency, bordering on the realms of almost being inhuman, he'd netted eighteen goals and provided ten assists in a period shorter than three months. But as a result, he had attracted several scavengers from all over Europe intent on signing him from Rosenborg. The most worrying of them was RB Leipzig, a team from Germany, which had decided to trigger his release clause.

Coach Johansen was distressed by the whole development. After milling over the issue for a few days, he'd decided to have a one-on-one with Zachary to gauge his stand. He could then plan accordingly and avoid falling into difficulties later if his best player suddenly decided to leave.

He hoped he would succeed in making Zachary see reason and convince him to stay with Rosenborg for a while longer by showing him some sincerity. One way to go about that was to discuss some of the plans he'd already set in motion to strengthen the Rosenborg squad. But he had to determine whether Zachary had any thoughts of leaving Trondheim before deciding on the best course of action.

"Bzzt Bzzzt! Bzzt Bzzzt!"

His phone started vibrating a moment later — as he was still deliberating on how to handle Zachary's situation. He couldn't help but smile for a bit after picking it and glancing at the screen. It was his old colleague and friend Carlos Alberto Miguel calling. He was one of the most reliable scouts, good at unearthing talented but affordable players from all around Europe.

Coach Johansen had tasked him with searching for talented defenders for Rosenborg only a week prior. He was eager to ascertain whether the scout had finally found some of them.

"Hello, Carlos," he said after accepting the call and placing his phone close to his ear. "How is your morning?"

"My morning is fine, Boyd," Carlos replied from the other end of the line with a Spanish accent. "But, please forgive me. I'm calling with some not-so-good news."

"Oh," Coach Johansen said, feeling as if his mood had sunk into an abyss. "Did you fail to get anyone?"

Carlos sighed audibly from the other end of the line. "Boyd, you've got to understand that there'll always be some good defenders all around Europe whenever you need them. But the problem is with your budget. You can't get the sort of quality you're looking for with the money you have."

"Moreover," the scout continued. "Most of the players I've chanced upon don't want to join a Norwegian side. They would rather stay in the lower divisions of the top leagues than move to Norway."

"Not even when there is the promise to play in the Europa League?"

"That also doesn't help your case," Carlos replied, sighing once again. "Basing on your history, most players on the market don't believe that you have a chance in hell to even make it out of the qualifying round. So, that promise of the Europa league has no impact on the talented players that hope to compete against the best."

"Oh," Coach Johansen said, frowning and leaning back into his chair. He'd believed that with a budget of five million Euros, he would be able to acquire the services of at least two good defenders who could improve the strength of his team at the back. But the scout had just crashed his hopes. So, he was feeling down at that moment.

"Boyd," Carlos said after a while. "My advice to you is this. You can either increase your budget by maybe three million Euros. With around eight million, you'll be able to get defenders who can really strengthen your defense and enable you to compete fairly in the Europa League. Otherwise, I really can't help you."

"Okay, let me talk to my bosses first," Coach Johansen said after a while, letting out a breath. "Thanks a lot for your help."

"It's my pleasure, Boyd," Carlos replied coolly. "Feel free to call me when you finish preparing things on your side. I'll be ready to help at any time."

"I will," Coach Johansen said. "Thanks again, and have a good morning."

"Likewise."

Coach Johansen could not help but sigh for the umpteenth time that morning after ending the call. One of his plans to strengthen the Rosenborg squad and help the team compete in the Europa League seemed to be already going downhill.

He didn't even try to call the club chairman to ask for more funds. He was well aware that the chairman would reject his request without giving it any thought.

The chairman had already explained that the club was in a tight spot financially. That was why the other executives were considering selling Zachary to RB Leipzig for around fifty million. With that sum, they would solve the club's financial difficulties and possibly acquire several more players to strengthen the squad.

So, Coach Johansen was in a sort of a bind because of the limited funding. He could only start making calls to a few other scouts and former colleagues to request their help.

He spent the entire morning on the phone, inquiring whether he could acquire the services of two good defenders at the price of five million. But even after two hours, he didn't manage to get a positive and satisfying response.

All the available defenders in the range of around 2 - 2.5 million Euros didn't meet his criteria. He was better off without them, considering that signing them wouldn't help him achieve his goals. So, he ended up wasting the whole morning without making any progress in solving his defensive problems. He was still in a dilemma.

Chapter 228 - Four Talented Young Players

Zachary managed to make it to Coach Johansen's office ten minutes before 11:00 AM — their scheduled meeting time. Just as he was about to knock on the door, he overheard Coach Johansen talking on the phone. So, he decided to wait at the door until the phone call ended.

But even while outside the room, Zachary could still pick up some bits and pieces of the conversation. The coach seemed to be discussing a few potential transfers to Rosenborg with some other party.

'Is the coach finally bringing in new defenders to the squad?' Zachary wondered, leaning closer to the door. But the next moment, the coach ended the conversation before he could hear anything more. He immediately stepped away from the door for a few moments before knocking.

"Come in," he heard Coach Johansen say from inside his office after a short while. Zachary pushed the door open and stepped into the spacious office.

"Have a seat," the coach said, glancing up from the screen of his laptop. He seemed like he hadn't slept for a couple of days. He looked a little ragged and a little shadowy beneath the eyes, while his usually neat red beard was shabby and out of place.

"Thank you, coach," Zachary replied, smiling. He pretended he hadn't noticed the coach's frazzled appearance and settled in one of the empty seats in front of the desk.

"So, the Norsk Toppfotball guys finally got their act together and awarded you the player of the month accolade," Coach Johansen remarked, half-smiling. "Congratulations once again, Zachary. I'm really happy for you."

"Thanks, Coach," Zachary replied, leaning back into his seat to make himself more comfortable.

"So, when are they presenting the Player of the Month Bronze Statuette to you?"

"Before our next Tippeligaen home game," Zachary responded. "That'll be on Sunday, August 4th, before our game against Sogndal IL."

"That's good," Coach Johansen said, nodding. "The fans will be excited by the presentation. That's good for us in terms of publicity. But that aside, I summoned you here to discuss another important issue, Zachary."

"Oh, please go ahead, coach," Zachary said, folding his arms across his chest.

"You know that I don't like beating around the bush," Coach Johansen said after a moment, holding Zachary's gaze. "So, please tell me. Have you received any contract offers from any other teams recently?"

"No," Zachary replied honestly. Aside from the Red Bull people approaching him before the Tippeligaen break, there wasn't any other. However, the Red Bull offer couldn't be termed as a recent one. So, he chose not to mention it.

"Oh," Coach Johansen said, raising a brow. He seemed not to be convinced.

"Why are you asking me this, coach?" Zachary inquired, matching the coach's gaze.

"Well," Coach Johansen said, still observing him. "There have been several teams tabling offers to sign you from Rosenborg of recent. I was wondering if they've tried contacting you. And if they have, what are your plans? Are you still with me, with us, here at Rosenborg? Or do you intend to switch to another team if there is a good offer?"

"I certainly don't have any plans of leaving Rosenborg in the middle of the season," Zachary was quick to reply. "I'll only think of leaving after winning a few trophies."

"That puts me at ease, Zachary," Coach Johansen said, grinning. "Even though the offers from some of the famous clubs can be quite tempting, I hope you remain with us a while longer. As long as you're a Rosenborg player, I'll always respect you and do my best to help you grow as an athlete."

"Don't worry, coach," Zachary said assuredly. "I'm still a Rosenborg player in both body and mind. My entire focus is on training and the preparations for the upcoming Rosenborg fixtures. I haven't given even a single thought to transferring out of Rosenborg."

"I'm glad," Coach Johansen said, suppressing a chuckle. "So, are you ready for the Europa League qualification match against Crusaders on Wednesday?"

"Yes, of course, I'm ready," Zachary said confidently.

"Good," Coach Johansen said, sighing. "If we play our cards right, we'll be able to make it far this season. That'll give you a chance to play against some of Europe's top teams. I'm actually trying my best to sign a few more defenders to bolster our team so we can compete seriously in the tournament."

"Oh," Zachary said, trying his best to act surprised. "Have you managed to get any?" He asked.

"Not yet," Coach Johansen replied. "I have tried searching in several countries across Europe. But all the available defenders are expensive and exceed our budget. But don't worry. I'm sure we'll get a few talented ones before the transfer window closes. Just focus on your training and leave the squad to me."

"Okay," Zachary said, nodding. "But have you tried searching in Africa, South America, or even Asia for defenders? I'm sure that there must be talented ones who're still waiting for a chance to play for a team in Europe."

"I have already engaged some of the scouts that I know all over the world, including a few in those three continents," Coach Johansen said, sighing. "But I'm still waiting for the results."

Zachary nodded as his mind started wandering. He tried to recall some of the yet-to-be famous African defenders that were about to make a breakthrough and receive offers from European Clubs.

He reckoned that Rosenborg would have a chance of signing those as long as they could promise them regular first-team football and a chance to play the Europa League. But he didn't mention anything to the coach right away since he wasn't sure whether the players in question had already joined famous clubs at that moment.

"One more thing before you go, Zachary," Coach Johansen said, breaking him out of his reverie.

"Remember to inform your agent to engage with the Rosenborg executives so that they can raise your wages. But remember, this wasn't my suggestion. Do you get my meaning, Zachary?"

"Yes, coach," Zachary said, nodding and grinning. "Thanks for informing me."

"Good," Coach Johansen said, half-smiling. "Okay, off you go. I have to get back to my work now. See you during tomorrow's training session, I guess."

"Yes, coach."

When Zachary ended the meeting with Coach Johansen, he returned home — to his apartment. After having a light snack to sate his hunger, he immediately started searching for more information about the soon-to-be-famous defenders in 2013.

He sat on the computer for more than three hours and googled all the famous names he could recall from his previous life. He didn't limit the search to Africa — but also South America, Asia, and Eastern Europe. Using a systematic method of eliminating any player who already possessed some media presence, he narrowed down the list of defense-minded players to four.

The first was Eric Baily — a yet-to-be famous Ivorian center-back, still struggling to get regular playing time on the Espanyol B team in the Segunda División B. He was a player who would get to play for teams like Manchester United and Villarreal in the future. So, Zachary was sure that if Rosenborg managed to sign him, he would be a fine addition to the team even though he was only nineteen.

The second was Yerry Mina — another center-back who'd already made his debut as a professional player for Deportivo Pasto, a team in Colombia. Although he was still around nineteen years of age, he would bring a lot to the Rosenborg squad if he agreed to join. Zachary had no doubts about Yerry Mina's capabilities since he was supposed to end up playing for both Barcelona and Everton a few years from then.

The third was William Troost-Ekong — a Nigerian center back, still fighting for a chance to get some first-team football action in a Dutch team called Groningen. He was a fine defender who'd impressed Zachary while playing for Nigeria in an African Cup of Nations tournament. He, too, would bring a lot to the Rosenborg squad if Coach Johansen signed him.

The fourth and last player on the list was not a pure defender but a very talented defensive midfielder. He was Thomas Teye Partey, a natural number-6, yet to cement his position on the Atlético Madrid B side competing in the lower Spanish league divisions. Zachary saw him as the most suitable to join the Troll Kids among the four. He was a beast in midfield since he would go—on to play for the Atlético Madrid's senior side and Arsenal in a few years. He was the right man for Rosenborg's defense if Coach Johansen could acquire his signature before other teams could spot him.

By the time Zachary finished searching for information about the players, it was already four in the evening. But he still dialed Coach Johansen's number and informed him that he would like to see him right away.

As soon as Coach Johansen accepted, Zachary immediately got into his R8 GT and cruised to Lerkendal to meet him. He believed that it was best not to delay some issues. So, he decided not to sleep before handing over the list of potential signings to the coach.

"What is the matter?" the Coach asked, looking up from his computer screen as soon as Zachary entered his office. "You seemed panicked on the phone. Is anything wrong?"

"Don't worry, coach," Zachary replied, smiling and placing down the list of four potential signings on his office desk.

"What's this, Zachary?" Coach Johansen asked, his gaze alternating between the piece of paper before him and Zachary's face.

"That's a list of four very talented players that I've chanced upon while watching a few football videos," Zachary replied, settling down in a seat before Coach Johansen's desk. He then went ahead and told him some concocted info on the four defensive-minded players. He talked at length and colored their skills to capture the Coach's interest.

"Oh," Coach Johansen said, raising a brow after hearing him out. He then picked up the paper and glanced at the list. "These are the names of the talented players." He stated, seemingly unconvinced.

"Yes," Zachary replied emphatically. He knew the coach would not readily believe him since he was just an eighteen-year-old in his eyes. Zachary had to try his best to have his list taken seriously. Otherwise, Rosenborg would find it hard to even make it through the group stages of the Europa League.

"Okay then," the coach said, surprising Zachary with his prompt decision. "I'll tell some of my associates to check out the players. Thank you for providing the list, Zachary."

"You're welcome, coach," Zachary said, matching his gaze. "But please do take that list seriously. You have to act fast when checking out those players. They're the sort of talents that won't stay in small teams for long. So, as we speak now, some other team may be close to signing them."

"Oh," Coach Johansen said, taking another glance at the piece of paper in his hands. "That's quite some high praise from you. Are they really that good?"

"Yes, coach," Zachary replied solemnly. "I would never joke about something like that. Just check them out quickly, and you'll understand."

"Okay, I'll do that, Zachary," Coach Johansen said, his eyes still on the list. "Don't worry."

"Then that puts my heart at ease, coach," Zachary said, standing. "I have to go now and prepare for tomorrow's training."

"Okay, have a good evening."

Chapter 229 - Imminent New Signings I

Coach Johansen was still in a state of amazement as he watched Zachary step out of his office after their brief chat. He couldn't just come to terms with the fact that his best player had also taken on the role of a club scout.

When Zachary had first disclosed the information about the four players, he'd taken him lightly. He found it almost unbelievable that a young eighteen-year-old player could discover four incredible young talents by watching some football videos.

But he started having second thoughts after recalling the sort of superhuman capabilities and vision the young Maestro possessed on the playing field.

It was a no-brainer that a footballer of Zachary's caliber would have very high standards when looking upon the talents of others. The players he considered gifted were sure to be phenomenal or unique in some aspects. So, he decided to check out the list before putting the whole issue to bed.

Without further ado, he immediately contacted his friends in Barcelona to send him some information about Eric Bailly, the first player on Zachary's list. He was a center-back playing for the Espanyol-B side in the Segunda División-B League at that moment. So, his friends managed to find a sufficient amount of data, including some match videos of the young player in action promptly. They managed to forward it to him even before he could leave his office that very evening.

"Let's get this over with," Coach Johansen mumbled as he opened the email with Eric Bailly's data. Some of his contacts in Barcelona had already mentioned that the center back was only nineteen years old and thus inexperienced. That was a downer for the coach since young defenders were always impulsive and prone to making mistakes when the stakes were high. So, he didn't expect much as he clicked on the dropbox attachment containing all the digital files.

However, after a few minutes of watching the videos and reading through Eric Bailly's profile, he cast away all the negative thoughts.

He was stunned, speechless.

Eric Bailly was as good as Zachary had described. He was solid in defense and with an incredible work rate that could rival that of the most experienced defenders in Europe. He was, without a doubt, the sort of player that could immediately bolster Rosenborg's defense.

Coach Johansen was determined to have his signature if Espanyol could agree to sell him. So, without any dilly-dallying, he contacted one of the Rosenborg scouts and sent him to Spain on a mission to initiate talks with the defender.

But he didn't stop at that. He quickly looked through the information of the other three young players on the list and sent scouts after them the following morning. He didn't rest easy until he'd made sure

that all the Rosenberg scouts had set off and were well on their way to negotiate with the four players. He then crossed his fingers and started waiting for the results while also preparing for the Europa League Qualification match against Crusaders Football Club.

On one of the training grounds of the Espanyol reserves team in Barcelona, Spain, a young African man had just finished his personal training for the day. After gulping down some water to sate his thirst, he cast his gaze above, at the setting sun, that seemed to be mocking him, and then shook his head. He was feeling a bit low at that moment since he hadn't managed to make it to the senior team for another season.

He'd put everything into his training, even going ahead to practice eight hours a day during the off-season. But the coaches were still not considering him even for the starting eleven on the reserves team. "Eric, you're still not yet ready," they would often say. "Be patient and stay true to your training. You'll eventually get your chance."

Eric Bailly was starting to grow frustrated by the statement.

Be that as it may, he didn't dare complain to any of the coaches. Despite not making it to the senior team, he was still earning an ample sum of money as a salary from Espanyol. That was enough to keep him quiet and patient until he could get a chance to showcase his talents.

"Eric," he heard someone call out to him while he was still thinking about life in general. "There you are," the familiar voice continued. "I was looking all over for you. Why aren't you picking up your phone?"

Eric Bailly turned around at a leisurely pace to face Graziano Battistini, his agent. "I was training and didn't have my phone with me," he said, smiling at the man in a suit. "Sorry about that."

"Well, no matter," his agent said, nodding. "How is your training going, and how are you doing?"

"I'm okay, and training is going on well," he said, maintaining a polite smile. "But why are you here? I'm guessing that you're not here to discuss my personal training. Are you?"

"I have some hopeful news," the agent said, smiling. "But should we find somewhere to sit before we can discuss?"

"Here is fine," he replied, suppressing his excitement. "So, go ahead and shoot."

"Okay," the agent said, nodding. "I'm just from a meeting with a representative from a club called Rosenborg in Norway. The club is interested in signing you and offering you regular first-team football."

"A team from Norway!" Eric mumbled, frowning slightly as his mood soured. He couldn't believe that his agent had brought him an offer from a team from some unknown league. He would rather stay in the Espanyol reserves team until he got the opportunity to join the senior team.

"Don't be quick to make a decision," his agent said hurriedly after seemingly reading his mind. "I also had that very same reaction when I first heard that Rosenborg was interested in you. But the representative managed to sway my mind after promising me that you would play regular first-team football and even participate in the Europa League."

"The club is playing in the Europa League!" Eric exclaimed, matching his agent's gaze. "How come I haven't heard much about this Rosenborg then?"

"Rosenborg usually qualifies for the Europa League," the agent said, sighing. "But the only problem is that it usually gets eliminated quite early on — even before the group stages."

"Oh," Eric said, frowning.

"But the Rosenborg representative managed to convince me that things will be different this season," the agent continued. "He showed me some videos of the highlights for their past few matches. That's when I immediately decided to contact you."

"So, you believe they will go far in the Europa League this season?" Eric asked, raising a brow.

"Yes, and that's why I'm here," the agent replied matter-of-factly. "I'm telling you, Eric, you've got to watch those highlights of Rosenborg. They have a ridiculous young player on their squad — the kind that is sure to win many matches if he has a good defense on his team. I don't even understand what he's doing in such a small team. You need to watch those videos first, Eric. You'll understand what I mean."

"Okay," Eric said, nodding. "Did you bring the videos with you?"

"Of course, I did," the agent replied, smiling. "I even brought the match data of that ridiculous player. We only need someplace quiet to go through them."

"Okay, then," Eric said. "We can watch from a nearby cafe."

"Good."

A few minutes later, the two of them were huddled together before a laptop screen, watching Zachary's highlights for the months of May, June, and July. They both almost jumped from their seats when they watched Zachary score the goal from a back-volley and then sighed at his insane rate of converting set-pieces. They reacted like people watching the most thrilling blockbuster movie in the world when they moved on to his July performance. They were beyond shocked by Zachary's prowess.

"I want to join this club," Eric Bailly said after they'd finished watching some of the videos. "But it has to be on condition that this Zachary is still on the team. Otherwise, I won't even consider it."

"Don't worry about that," the agent replied, grinning. "I even talked to the Rosenborg coach at length over the phone. He assured me that Zachary Bemba has promised to stay at Rosenborg for quite some time. Moreover, we'll add a clause that will void the agreement between you and Rosenborg in case Zachary leaves the team."

"Oh," Eric said, nodding. "Then go ahead and negotiate the deal. But what about my contract with Espanyol? How are we going to handle it?"

"Don't worry about that," the agent said. "I already talked to the sporting director about your situation. He says that you can transfer as long as Rosenborg can offer the right price."

"Then good," Eric said, nodding. "Then you know what to do. My terms are very few, as my sole aim is to obtain some exposure by playing for Rosenborg. One is regular first-team football, and two is plenty of playing time in the Europa League. For the salary, you can negotiate as you see fit."

"Okay then," the agent said, nodding. "I will go ahead and initiate the process. But you better start getting prepared for the medical. I have a feeling that this will be a swift deal."

"I'm always ready for any medicals," Eric said, giving his agent a sideways glance. "So, go ahead and negotiate the deal. Don't worry about anything else."

"Okay."

In a few other parts of the world, similar scenes were taking place as the Rosenborg scouts used nearly the same tactics to engage the agents of the young players. First, they would show them the match videos of Zachary and his insane match statistics to cultivate their interest in Rosenborg. Then, they would go in for the kill by promising them regular first-team football plus Europa League action. As a result, they'd made considerable progress in signing the four young players on Zachary's list even by the end of that very day.

Chapter 230 - Imminent New Signings II

Tuesday, July 30, 2013.

"Brrring! Brrriiiiiing! Brrring! Brrriiiiiing..."

The sound of the phone ringing broke the silence in Coach Johansen's office, instantly forcing him out of his deep state of concentration. He smiled since he'd been anticipating the call. He immediately pushed aside his strategy game cards before picking up the phone by pressing the accept button — almost by reflex.

"Yes," he said after placing the receiver next to his ear.

"Coach Johansen, how is your evening? It's me, Kristoffer, calling from the city of San Juan de Pasto in Colombia."

As expected, it was the scout he'd sent to Colombia to initiate talks with Yerry Mina, one of the defenders on Zachary's list.

"I was expecting your call, Kristoffer," Coach Johansen replied, leaning back into his seat and smiling to himself. "Did you manage to make any progress with Yerry Mina?"

"Yes, coach," Kristoffer Nielsen, the Rosenborg scout, replied. "He has finally agreed to make the switch. But first, his agent, who also happens to be his uncle, has requested to video chat with you over Skype before they can put pen on paper. He still doubts my identity and thinks I might be a con artist trying to dupe them into a shady deal."

"Well," Coach Johansen said, smiling to himself. "That's understandable. I'm okay with having a chat with him at any time if that can verify your identity. Go ahead and set up the time for the video meeting."

"Ahh, coach," the scout said in an indecisive tone.

"Yes."

"The thing is this," the scout said. "There's no need for us to set up the time for the meeting."

"Why?"

"That's because both Yerry Mina, his uncle, and father are all here with me. They insisted that I call you right away, or they would call the police and have me sleep in jail. Moreover, I had to put you on the loudspeaker while making the call in order to assure them that I'm genuine and sincere. So, sorry about that, coach."

"Oh" was all that coach Johansen could manage for the next few moments.

He couldn't help but wonder whether his scout, Kristoffer, looked like a thug. None of his other scouts had run into issues while initiating talks with the other players. They'd all produced very positive results within a short time and even began the process of negotiating personal terms. On the other hand, Kristoffer was still trying to establish his identity so that the young player could take him seriously. The coach was perplexed.

"Coach," the scout said from the other end of the line after a few more seconds of silence. "Are you still there?"

"Yes, I'm still on the line," Coach Johansen replied. "I was just surprised. Do they want to have a video chat right now? We have to do it quickly since I have a pre-match tactical meeting to preside over in thirty minutes."

"Yes," Kristoffer replied emphatically. "They want to have the video chat immediately. But if you're busy, I can try to convince them to wait until tomorrow morning, Norwegian time."

"No, no, it's all right," Coach Johansen replied, sighing. 'Being a coach is really hard.' He thought to himself. "You can call me right now on my Skype. I'll talk to them right away so that you can start moving the negotiations forward. We don't have a lot of time since the Europa League is starting tomorrow."

"Okay, coach," the scout replied, his voice seemingly relaxing. "I'll call you in about a minute. See you then." He ended the call.

A few minutes later, Coach Johansen received a call from Kristoffer's Skype ID. He immediately accepted it.

"Yes, Kristoffer," he said, glancing at the bearded face of the scout, which had just populated the screen. "Put them on. I don't have much time."

"Aye, coach," the scout replied before stepping away from the webcam. A moment later, three smiling faces with dark skin populated the screen. "So, you're the coach of Rosenborg who wants to recruit my

nephew?" The one that seemed like the oldest of the three inquired. Surprisingly, he spoke fluent English, although he was from South America.

"Yes, that's correct," Coach Johansen replied, nodding. "I was the one who sent Kristoffer to come and negotiate with Yerry Mina. We want to recruit him into the Rosenborg squad because of his incredible defensive talents."

"Oh, okay," the man remarked, without any noticeable reaction. No excitement or anxiety! The man was the true definition of stone-faced as he kept his eyes locked with those of Coach Johansen through the computer screen. "So, how can we verify that you're the coach of Rosenborg? Please understand. This deal appeared out of thin air. So, we have to be careful to avoid sending Yerry to some people who might want to harvest his kidneys."

Coach Johansen chuckled despite himself after hearing that. "Well, that's simple," he said after a while. "You can try googling my name and title, Boyd Johansen - the coach of Rosenborg. You'll be able to see my picture on the club website and on a lot more sports pages in Scandinavia. I think that should verify my identity. Shouldn't it?"

"Yes, that should be enough verification, coach," the man who seemed like Yerry's uncle and his agent replied, finally smiling. "Sorry for taking up your time. You know you can never be too careful in these parts of Colombia. But that aside, I'm glad you managed to take some time to talk to us. It shows that you really care about Yerry. And that puts our hearts at ease."

"You don't need to be so polite and apologetic," Coach Johansen said. "It's my pleasure to straighten out potential misunderstandings that may negatively affect my team..."

Coach Johansen continued chatting with the other party for the next ten minutes and outlined why he needed to sign Yerry Mina. They went over almost all the details regarding Yerry's potential move to Rosenborg, including his work permit and visa issues, language issues, plus his role on the squad. By the time the coach ended the call with the other party, they'd already agreed to the move.

So, with a lightened mood, Coach Johansen closed his laptop and then made his way to the tactics room for the pre-match tactical meeting.

"Good evening, everyone," he said, sweeping his gaze across the whole room when the players finished taking up their seats. He could see that they all looked attentive since it was the meeting preceding the first game of Rosenborg's Europa League campaign.

"Good evening, coach," they replied in unison.

"As I already said earlier today," he began, half-smiling. "We will play our first Europa League qualifying match against Crusaders Football Club in Belfast tomorrow."

"But before we delve into the tactics, I would first like to take the opportunity to announce the squad that will be traveling to Northern Ireland tomorrow morning."

"On the starting line-up," the coach continued without a pause. "We have Daniel Rørlund as our keeper. Our defense will comprise Mikael Dorsin, Verner Rønning, Tore Reginiussen, and Peter Ankersen. Our midfielders will be Mike Jensen, Ole Selnes, and Zachary Bemba. In striking we will have John Chibuike, Borek Dockal, and Steffen Iversen."

"On the bench, we'll have Nicki Nielsen, Lund Hansen, Jonas Svensson, Jon Inge Høiland, Fredrik Midtsjø, and Mohammed-Awal Issah. That's it for the squad. Any questions?"

All the players remained silent and didn't raise their hands.

"Good," the coach said after sweeping a glance around. "I'm glad that we're on the same page. Now to the tactics."

"Since we're playing away, we shouldn't take our opponents lightly," he continued. "We'll utilize our usual 4-3-3 defensive formation and focus on hitting them on the counter. I expect all of you to remain focused, creative, and hardworking for the entire duration of the game. Every man on the pitch, except the center-forward, has to rush back and defend whenever we lose possession. If you do that, I believe we'll crash the Crusaders team like a bug tomorrow. Are we together, guys?"

"Yes, coach."

"That's good."

For the next hour, the coach continued expounding on the game plan. He discussed the movements he expected the players to make on the pitch and went over their roles in great detail. He concluded the meeting by informing them that they would be taking the early morning flight to Belfast before sending them home.