

## **Greatest 231**

### Chapter 231 - The 2013\14 Europa League Serial Mission

After the pre-match tactical meeting, Zachary exchanged a few words with his teammates before making his way out of the tactics room and heading to the parking lot. He then got into his R8 GT and cruised home at a leisurely pace.

He managed to arrive at his apartment building in less than half an hour since traffic was light on the road. He alighted from his vehicle and then ascended the stairs, deciding to first head to Kristin's apartment on the fourth floor. He had just recalled he had an appointment with her that evening.

"Hello, Zachary," Kristin said with a smile right after opening her door. "Welcome, and please come in."

"Thank you," Zachary replied, stepping through the entrance and into the living room of Kristin's cozy apartment. The set-up of the place was not very dissimilar to the one in his apartment. However, hers felt more exquisite — because of the more elegant furniture and the beautiful paintings hanging on the walls.

"Your place is neat as usual," Zachary said, settling down in one of the comfy chairs. "How's your evening?"

"My evening is fine," Kristin said, smiling and settling on a sofa opposite his. "And thanks for appreciating my place. Did you just come from training?"

"Not exactly," Zachary replied, shaking his head. "We had a late tactical meeting since we're playing our first Europa League qualifier tomorrow."

"Oh," Kristin said, raising a brow. "Is that the match against Crusaders, the team from Northern Ireland?"

"Yes, that's the one," Zachary replied, nodding.

"Do you think you'll win?"

"Of course, we have no choice but to win," Zachary replied matter-of-factly. "Otherwise, we won't get to participate in the actual Europa League. Moreover, Crusaders is a much weaker team compared to us. So, the odds are on our side."

"You didn't answer the question, Zachary," Kristin remarked.

Zachary just smiled at her before saying, "You mentioned that you wanted to discuss something over the phone earlier. What is it?"

"Yes," Kristin said, leaning back into the sofa and holding Zachary's gaze. "It's about the rumors about you in the media. As your publicity secretary, I hope you come out and make your stand so that you can put a stop to them."

"Oh," Zachary said, creasing a brow. "You mean the recent talk on the internet that I'm transferring out of Rosenborg?"

"Yes," Kristin replied, nodding. "The whole thing is getting out of hand, and it's causing needless worry for your fans. You should see the messages I'm getting on both Twitter and Facebook. A lot of your followers are asking whether it's true that you're leaving Rosenborg. That's why I would like you to come out and clarify the situation."

"Okay," Zachary said, nodding. "You can tweet or post that I have no intentions of leaving Rosenborg at the moment. You can then mention that all messages insinuating that I'm close to making a transfer out of Rosenborg are baseless. That should close down the rumors. Shouldn't it?"

"Yes, that's good enough," Kristin said, her face blossoming into a smile. "That'll really put your fans at ease."

"Then, that's good," Zachary said, nodding. "Is there anything else? If not, I would like to head upstairs and get some sleep. We're setting off for the airport at six tomorrow morning. So I have to go to bed early."

"Just one more thing," Kristin said, voice lowering. "Have you talked to my grandpa recently? I think he's still waiting for you to give him a reply to his proposal."

"Oh, my!" Zachary said, face-palming. "Me and my forgetfulness! That's another thing that completely escaped my mind due to the crazy June and July schedules."

"I understand, Zachary," Kristin said, nodding. "No need to try explaining to me. But try to call him soon and give him a response. Whether it's positive or negative, he won't hold anything against you. Okay?"

"Okay," Zachary confirmed, nodding. "I'll give him a call the day after tomorrow. That'll be the morning right after the match. Thanks for reminding me."

"Then good," Kristin said, beaming. "I guess that's everything for today. I wish you all the best in tomorrow's game. May you annihilate the other team by scoring a double hat-trick."

"Ha-ha," Zachary gave a forced laugh on hearing that. "I think that I need to remind you that I'm taking part in a football match, not a basketball game. But thanks anyway. I'll try my best as always."

Kristin smiled at that. "Since it's you we're talking about, I wouldn't be surprised if you scored eight," she said in a solemn voice. "Anyway, goodbye and have a goodnight. Don't stay up late."

Zachary nodded, standing up from his seat. "Good night to you too," he said, starting to march towards the door. "By the way, how many followers do I have on Twitter now?" He asked, pausing mid-step.

"Guess," Kristin said, smiling mysteriously.

"50,000," Zachary said, deciding on humoring her. He had had about 20,000 followers when he handed the account over to Kristin for management. So, he assumed the numbers had just about doubled since then.

"You couldn't be any more wrong," Kristin said, suppressing a chuckle. "As of today, your Twitter account has more than 420,000 followers."

"420,000!" Zachary exclaimed, turning around to glance at Kristin. He was well aware that a good fraction of famous footballers didn't have that many followers on Twitter. So, he couldn't help but

wonder what Kristin had done with the account for it to garner such attention and popularity within less than two months. "How did you do it?" He asked, giving her a sideways glance.

"I have my ways," Kristin replied with a mysterious smile. "You better go and rest. Otherwise, you won't be at your best during the match tomorrow. And that will spell trouble for us."

"Okay, okay," Zachary said, nodding. "I'm off. I don't know what you're doing to gather that many followers on Twitter. But thanks for the hard work."

"You're welcome. Good night."

Zachary ascended the stairs at a leisurely pace and soon returned to his apartment on the sixth floor. But no sooner had he walked through the entrance — heading into the living room than a system notification sounded within his mind.

"DING"

"The system has detected that the user has been added to Rosenborg's 2013/14 Europa League squad," the system AI's apathetic voice sounded in his mind soon after.

"Conditions for a long-term serial system mission have been met."

"The 2013/14 Europa League Serial Mission initiated successfully."

"Does the user wish to view the details of the mission right away?"

"Positive," Zachary replied, settling into one of his sofas. "Bring out the details right away."

"DING"

"Attention user," intoned the AI as the translucent bluish system interface manifested before Zachary.

"Mission details have been displayed on the interface."

Zachary nodded to himself before leaning back into the sofa and beginning to peruse through the information displayed on the interface. He wasn't too excited since he knew winning the Europa League was no walk in the park.

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G.O.A.T MISSIONS

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#NEW MISSION: 2013 Europa League Serial Challenge

->The system has detected that the user is part of the Rosenborg BK squad taking part in the 2013/14 Europa League knock-out tournament. The system has designed an associated mission for the event.

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->The user needs to accept the mission first to stand a chance of winning rewards after completing the milestones below.

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\*Milestone 1: Play over 80% of the fixtures in the 2013/14 Europa League tournament for Rosenborg.

\*Milestone 2: Help Rosenborg qualify out of the group to the round-of-sixteen of the 2013/14 Europa League tournament.

\*Milestone 3: Help Rosenborg qualify for the quarter-finals of the 2013/14 Europa League tournament.

\*Milestone 4: Help Rosenborg qualify for the semi-finals of the 2013/14 Europa League tournament.

\*Milestone 5: Help Rosenborg qualify for the finals of the 2013/14 Europa League tournament.

\*Milestone 6: Help Rosenborg become the overall champions of the 2013/14 Europa League Tournament

\*Milestone 7: Provide the most assists in the 2013/14 Europa League tournament while playing for Rosenborg.

\*Milestone 8: Become the top scorer of the 2013/14 Europa League Tournament while playing for Rosenborg.

\*Milestone 9: Become the Best Player of the 2013/14 Europa League Tournament while playing for Rosenborg.

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\*Rewards:

->Milestone 1 completion reward: 2,000 Juju-points

->Milestone 2 completion reward: 5,000 Juju-points

->Milestone 3 completion reward: 30,000 Juju-points

->Milestone 4 completion reward: 50,000 Juju-points

->Milestone 5 completion reward: 100,000 Juju Points

->Milestone 6 completion reward: A dosage of S-grade vitality enhancing elixir.

->Milestone 7 completion reward: 20,000 Juju-points

->Milestone 8 completion reward: 40,000 Juju-points

->Milestone 9 completion reward: A dosage of S-grade mental conditioning elixir.

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NB: There will be additional rewards if the user realizes any other milestones that can unlock hidden missions.

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->The user can choose not to accept the mission.

\*Accept \*Reject

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\*Punishment if none of the milestones has been achieved after the stipulated time (If the user accepts the mission).

->Minus 120,000 Juju-points

\*The user has to complete at least one milestone before the tournament ends to escape the penalty.

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\*Remarks: Only by imagining, believing, and attempting the impossible can one accomplish the impossible.

Moreover, the word impossible should never appear in the vocabulary of any footballer vying for the position of the G.O.A.T.

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Zachary sighed after looking through the mission notification message. As expected, the rewards for the Europa League milestones were very enticing. Any of the S-graded elixirs could help his related attributes make a breakthrough to the S-grading. So, he wanted to acquire them.

However, he also understood that realizing more than two mission milestones would be a tall order even if Rosenborg managed to sign more players. Even big teams like Arsenal, FC Porto, Ajax, and Manchester United usually found it hard to win the tournament. So, he couldn't be sure about what stage his team would manage to reach.

Nonetheless, he was determined to compete by giving his very best in the competition. So, he decided to click the accept button. Besides, he believed he would achieve the first milestone of playing more than 80% of the matches in the Europa League for Rosenborg. So, he wasn't afraid he would incur the penalty for completely failing the mission.

Chapter 232 - Against Crusaders Football Club

The following day, the Rosenborg squad traveled to Northern Ireland by plane — to face Crusaders FC in the opening fixture of the 2013/14 Europa League qualifying round.

It was Zachary's first overseas trip as a Rosenborg player. So, he was eager to test his skills against a team from outside Norway. His heart was already pounding hard and fast with anticipation as the plane touched down on the runway of Belfast International Airport at eleven that Wednesday morning.



"Rosenborg players," an airport official said as soon as the Troll Kids stepped out of the plane into the warm summer air of Northern Ireland. "Welcome to Belfast. We have already organized transportation to your hotel. Please, follow me. I'll guide you through the airport."

"Thank you," Coach Johansen, who was leading the Rosenborg entourage, replied. "Please lead the way."

The players followed the airport official through the airport procedures, which, surprisingly, weren't overly complicated, in Zachary's opinion. They practically walked through customs without any need to show passports or identity cards.

Twenty minutes later, they were on a bus to the Belfast Hilton Hotel, weaving through traffic on the wide streets of the magnificent port city of Belfast. Zachary was seated close to the back. Throughout the trip, his eyes had remained fixed on the sights outside the bus window. He was captivated by the artistic charm of the port city.

It had a distinctly European feel, with balconied buildings overlooking broad avenues and small places to sit, eat, and relax as folk went about their day. However, traffic wasn't so boisterous on the streets, giving the city a sense of tranquility absent from most other places. Zachary was fascinated by it all. He was even considering Belfast as a potential place to set up a residence when he eventually retired from professional football.

"You can take a two-hour rest in your respective rooms," Coach Johansen said, his voice loud and clear, as the bus was pulling into the parking lot of the Hilton Belfast Hotel. "We'll then have lunch at half-past one before heading to the training ground to make some final preparations for the game. So, please don't oversleep."

The players laughed at that as the bus came to a halt. However, they wouldn't dare disobey the coach's instructions. Without further ado, they exited the bus before quickly checking into the hotel and then heading to their respective rooms to rest.

Zachary slept for the entirety of the two hours since he'd woken up at 4:30 that morning. He escaped from slumberland to have a light lunch before joining the rest of his teammates on a nearby training ground for the pre-match practice drills.

The hours passed by quickly, and it was soon six in the evening — only an hour to the scheduled start of the match. Zachary and his teammates took the bus to Seaview Stadium, the venue for the first leg of their first Europa League qualification fixture against Crusaders.

"Okay, guys," Coach Johansen said, sweeping a glance across the players after they'd settled down in the visitor's dressing room. "We'll be playing Crusaders Football Club in about thirty minutes. But please do not take our opponents lightly, even though they seem like a small team. I want you all a hundred percent focused from the first minute until you hear the final whistle. Play smart football, fulfill your roles perfectly, and don't make mistakes. If you do that, I'm sure we'll thrash them like bugs. Are we together, guys?"

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

"That's good," Coach Johansen said, nodding. He then went over the game plan one more time before sending the players to the pitch.

\*FWEEEEEEE\*

The referee blew the whistle, signaling for the official start of the game at 7:00 PM. It was like he'd just poked a hornets' nest and set its occupants upon the players of Crusaders FC.

Zachary and his teammates started launching waves of attacks on the team from Northern Ireland from the very first minute. They arrayed themselves in the 4-3-3 formation to move the ball forward quickly, giving the opponents no time to relax.

Coach Johansen's counterattacking strategy was already starting to look pointless even in the early stages of the first half. The match was already turning into a one-sided affair with Rosenborg dictating proceedings. There wasn't any need or opportunity to counterattack.

Zachary was once again as brilliant as ever. With his stamina graded as the S- by the system, he was all over the pitch, acting as the perfect playmaker to link defense and attack.

Thanks to his resourcefulness with the ball, the Troll Kids grew more dangerous with every passing minute. They created their first solid chance at goal in the 19th minute.

After receiving a pass from Mikael Dorsin, the Rosenborg left-back, Zachary pushed forward, slaloming his way past a couple of defenders before pulling the trigger. He unleashed a shot from right outside the box that moved towards the goal like a ballistic missile homing on its target.

However, Sean O'Neill, the Crusaders' keeper, was alert. He managed to make a diving save and push the ball away from his goal with out-stretched fingertips. The referee pointed to the corner flag right after the ball had sailed past the post by mere centimeters.

Zachary went against the wishes of his coach and decided to take the corner. By relying on the Bend-it-like-Beckham-Juju, he floated a superb curling ball into the crowded box as soon as the referee blew the whistle.

Mikael Dorsin, the Rosenborg left-back, immediately out-jumped the rest of the players in the box to meet the ball at the edge of the box. He brushed it with the side of his head, altering its path by a slight margin and sending it to the inside of the right post.

1:0.

Rosenborg had managed to strike first in an away game through Mikael Dorsin, their assistant captain. A momentary silence seemed to descend upon the Seaview Stadium immediately after — as Zachary and his teammates celebrated the goal.

But that wasn't the end of Rosenborg's spell of dominance.

The Rosenborg players continued dictating the tempo of the game after the goal celebrations. They grew bolder and started attacking more frequently after the Crusaders failed to generate any form of sustained pressure on them. It was all Rosenborg for the next few minutes.

Zachary continued playing his role perfectly in the midfield. He was always in motion whenever he had the ball, running into spaces or at opponents whenever Rosenborg lost possession. He worked like a tireless madman throughout the match and, as a result, managed to create Rosenborg's second goal early in the second half.

In the 61st minute, he managed to win an aerial battle against Jordan Owens, one of the Crusaders' midfielders, in the middle third. Before the rest of the opponents could react, he unleashed one of his signature defense-splitting through-passes to Borek Dockal, the Rosenberg right forward.

With that immediate switch from defense to attack, he caught the opponents napping and sent his teammate well on the way towards the goal.

The Crusaders could not react as Borek Dockal connected with Zachary's sweet pass on the edge of the box and unleashed an unstoppable curling effort beyond the despairing dive of the keeper.

But the Rosenberg players didn't take the foot off the gas right after scoring the third goal. They continued pushing forward in droves and forced the opponents into a series of desperate situations.

Consequently, fouls started flying across the pitch with an ever-increasing intensity as the Crusaders grew more frustrated. They soon conceded a series of set-pieces in the final third, gifting Zachary the perfect chance to further seal Rosenberg's place in the next Europa League qualifying round.

With the Dead-Ball Specialist Juju in his skills repertoire, he didn't disappoint. He successfully hammered two more nails in the Crusaders' coffin by converting two set-pieces — one in the 72nd and another in the 74th minute of gameplay. With those, he'd managed to establish the perfect start to his Europa League campaign with a brace.

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CRUSADERS FC 0 : ROSENBORG 4

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Coach Johansen couldn't help but smile after casting a glance at the stadium jumbotron. His team had finally shaped up and started putting up consistent displays even in away matches. He could hardly contain his happiness as he followed proceedings on the field of play.

"Coach Johansen," his assistant, Trond Henriksen, said from beside him. "Don't you think we should substitute some of the starters? We need to rest them for the game against Sogndal on Sunday. And, of course, we don't want them getting injured in the final minutes of this game."

"You're right," Coach Johansen replied without taking his eyes off the field of play. "We shouldn't risk our key players for a game that we've already won. So, go ahead and inform Jonas, Fredrick, and Jon Inge to start warming up. I want them on for Zachary, Borek, and Mikael within a few minutes."

"That's a good call," Coach Henriksen replied. "I'll inform them right away."

Zachary didn't feel any displeasure after being taken out of the field of play in the 80th minute. He understood the coach was trying to rest him for the next game three days later.

Besides, he had also scored two goals and made a perfect start to his Europa League campaign. He felt like he was walking on clouds and didn't have any space in his being to feel any irritation. So, with a light heart, he returned to the bench and continued watching the game until it ended 4:0 in favor of Rosenborg.

#### Chapter 233 - Plans For The Upcoming Matches

After spending a night at the luxurious Hilton Belfast Hotel, Zachary and his teammates returned to Trondheim the following morning in a jubilant mood.

The excitement of crashing Crusaders Football Club in the Europa League qualifying round had not worn off even after a night of celebrating. The players were all smiles as they exited the bus at the parking lot of Lerkendal Stadium with their luggage in hand.

"Okay, guys," Coach Johansen hollered out loudly, clapping his hands, right after all the players had exited the bus. "Can I have a bit of your attention before you leave?"

Zachary and the rest of the Rosenborg players immediately started moving quickly after hearing his yell. They acted with a practiced urgency, evolved over months of responding to the coach's instructions. In a few seconds, they'd assembled around him.

"Welcome back home," the coach said, smiling. "But first, let's congratulate ourselves again upon winning the first leg of our first fixture in the Europa League qualifying round. We managed to destroy the Crusaders without giving them a chance to breathe. We're ROSENBORG! ROSENBORG! ROSENBORG..." He ended his little speech with a victory cheer.

All the players responded by clapping and yelling their versions of victory chants after hearing the coach. They continued singing and dancing for the next few seconds like they were high on alcohol. Each one of them was in a festive mood.

"Okay, that's enough," Coach Johansen yelled at the top of his voice, raising his arm to request silence after a while. The players, of course, obeyed and stopped the cheering.

"That was some incredible display you guys put up against the Crusaders in Belfast," the coach began, still smiling. "You were brilliant, precise, and intense while on the attack. Your intensity and drive during that game could rival that of some top teams in Europe. That is why we managed to win the game with four goals to none, even while playing at an away ground. I'm really proud of your performance."

"But," the coach continued, sweeping a glance across his players. "We must not relax after winning the game. We now have to put the victory behind us and focus on recovering and preparing for the upcoming matches."

"We'll play Sogndal at home on Sunday evening, just two days from now — that's if we're not counting today. Then we'll have to welcome the Crusaders to Lerkendal for the Europa League return leg next Wednesday. After that, we'll face Strømsgodset away in Drammen the following Sunday. So, as you can see, we have a very tight schedule for the next few days. That's why we now need to return our focus to training and start prepping for those three fixtures. You've got to remain focused if we are to continue winning. That's all I'm asking from you. Are you with me, guys?"

"Yes, coach."

The coach nodded and folded his arms across his chest before continuing in a solemn voice. "We'll only be taking today off to recover from match fatigue. You can go home, or go shopping, or do anything else that helps you relax. But that is only for today. Tomorrow, I expect you here early in the morning for gym work with your fitness coaches. After that, we'll immediately start the official preparations for the next three games. I expect you to be at your best throughout the entire training session. Otherwise, don't complain when you don't make the squads for any of the upcoming matches. Are we together, guys?"

"Yes, coach," the players replied.

"Good," Coach Johansen said, nodding. He then touched on a few other issues concerning the training schedule over the next few days before releasing the players for their day off.

Zachary immediately got into his R8 GT and steered it out of the stadium's parking lot, intending to head home and relax for the entire day. But just as he was joining the main street, en route to Stj?rdalsveien, he heard his phone vibrate from the passenger seat beside him.

But he didn't dare pick it up since there were strict regulations against mobile phone usage while driving in Norway. Instead, he cast a glance at the rearview mirror before pulling up into a nearby parking space. Without further ado, he grabbed his smartphone from the passenger seat and then glanced at the screen.

He couldn't help but smile after noticing that he'd just received a text message from Camilla. He was excited to hear from her since they'd spent more than a week without meeting.

'Hey, honey," he started reading the text message.

'Welcome back, and congratulations upon your incredible performance in Belfast. My heart was racing when I watched the highlights of your game against the Crusaders. Would you like to go out and celebrate? Today or tomorrow is fine. I'm really looking forward to hugging you, kissing you, and taking a walk with you again. I miss you so much, darling.'

'Camilla.'

Zachary's smile blossomed into a grin as he started preparing a response. He'd long warmed up to her over the two months they'd spent interacting. He really enjoyed her company.

'Hey, Camilla," he typed. "Thanks for reaching out. I miss you too. But luckily, I have a day off today. We can go out for lunch or maybe dinner. You can pick a place and time."

'Great," Camilla replied almost immediately. 'I'm still at work right now. I'll get off at 3:00. Let's meet then and make plans."

'Okay, then,' Zachary replied by text. 'I'll pick you up from Miller Bil at around 3:00 PM. See you then.'

'Great. Can't wait to see you. Have a good day.'

Zachary felt his mood lighten as he placed his phone back on the passenger seat. Camilla's timing was as great as ever. She would only call when he had some free time and never bothered him when he was busy with training. She'd never tried to interrupt his schedule since they'd started spending time together. Zachary liked her for that.

## Chapter 234 - Zachary's Decision

Coach Johansen had decided to put in a few hours of work in his office after sending away his players. He had a tight schedule with all the Europa League, Tippeligaen, and Norwegian Cup matches coming up in August. He didn't have the luxury of relaxing and resting — at least not until he'd won some trophies with Rosenborg.

However, just as he'd entered a deep state of concentration, designing the game plan for the match against Sogndal, Mr. Erik Hoftun, the sporting director, burst into his office. The man seemed pretty angry at that moment.

"Boyd," he said, creasing a brow and holding the coach's gaze. "What's this I'm hearing about you initiating the process of signing four unknown and inexperienced players? How come I know nothing about these transactions?"



"Erik, have a seat first," Coach Johansen replied, raising an arm in a placating gesture. "We can discuss slowly after that. Okay?"

"Hmmm," the sporting director harrumphed at that. But he still settled down in one of the free chairs in front of Coach Johansen's desk. "I'll ask again. How come you're about to sign four players from who knows where? We haven't even assessed them to see if they can fit in Rosenborg, yet, you've already negotiated personal terms with them."

"The chairman gave me the go-ahead to utilize a budget of 4 million Euros to strengthen my squad," Coach Johansen replied, matching the sporting director's gaze. "That's what I did. I went ahead and searched for four players that I'm sure will boost the defensive capabilities of my squad. So, where am I wrong, Mr. Director?"

"Stop with the sarcasm, Boyd," the sporting director said, also matching the coach's gaze. "You know very well that you can't sign the players without first consulting me. But you've gone ahead and offered inexperienced players promissory estoppels in the name of Rosenborg. What's wrong with you? What if you find they aren't as talented as you expected? What then?"

"They are very talented young players," Coach Johansen insisted confidently. "I'm sure about that. Just wait and see. You'll understand what I mean when they start playing for Rosenborg. Moreover, we can refuse to offer them any contracts if they don't pass the medicals. So, what are you worried about?"

"You're that confident," Mr. Erik said, raising a brow. "But have you considered that if you're wrong, your job will be in jeopardy? You're about to spend 3.8 million dollars on inexperienced players that might or might not perform. That's a risky venture that can negate all your achievements with Rosenborg if it doesn't bear fruit."

Coach Johansen could only sigh without giving any comments. He was aware that he was treading on thin ice after deciding to make the purchases. Buying a young inexperienced player was like casting a bet. You never really knew whether it would result in a profit or a loss in the long run. But he was prepared to try since he trusted Zachary's vision and his own intuition.

"Who the hell even picked that list of players?" Mr. Hoftun continued after noticing that Coach Johansen was choosing to remain silent. "Why are you so confident in signing them? Is it Mr. Stein? Why didn't you consult any other executives before offering them the promissory estoppels?" He was firing questions at a rate of a machine gun while matching the coach's gaze.

"Mr. Erik," Coach Johansen said after a short while. His tone had finally turned very solemn. "If you wanted me to buy established and experienced players, you should have increased my budget to at least 12 million. I'm only working with the money I have — the same funds that you allocated to me, to the best of my ability. Yet, here you are complaining! So, what do you want me to do?"

The sporting director could only sigh on hearing the question. "Boyd," he said, shaking his head. "I know that you're doing your best for the club. But before you make major decisions, at least consult the legal advisor or me first. Okay?"

"I understand," Coach Johansen replied, voice softening. "But I needed to offer these four players a legally binding promise of a contract right away. Otherwise, I would have lost them to some other party. That was why I was quick to act. However, they are very talented. I promise you that."

"If you say so," Mr. Hoftun said, shaking his head. "One more thing. Did Zachary's Twitter post, the one about having never thought of leaving Rosenborg, have something to do with you?"

"Why would you ask me that, Erik?" Coach Johansen countered with his own question. "Zachary is an adult with his own agent. He has his own thoughts about which clubs he would like to play for."

"But you've been his coach from the academy years," the sporting director argued, holding the coach's gaze. "You do have some sway over his decisions. Don't you?"

"Do you really believe that I can convince a player as talented as him to remain with us if he doesn't wish to?" Coach Johansen said, shaking his head. "It's his own decision to stay at the club. And since he has already made it public, you better put a halt to your thoughts of selling him. Otherwise, you'll antagonize the entire Rosenborg fan base right in the middle of the season."

"Coach Johansen," Mr. Erik said, letting out a breath. "I hope you know what you're doing. Have a good day." He stood up quickly and walked out of the office.

Coach Johansen could only sigh and shake his head after the sporting director's dramatic departure. He could guess that the rest of the executives were against the signing of the young players — perhaps due to the club's financial situation.

Nevertheless, he was determined to follow through with the signing, even if he risked antagonizing the whole bunch of them. He preferred winning trophies to making profits or cutting losses as a football manager. He was a coach, not a businessman.

After returning to his apartment, Zachary immediately feasted on a sumptuous breakfast to sate his hunger — before going through his morning yoga routine for the next hour. He then cleaned up and settled on a sofa, intending to relax while training in the system's G.O.A.T Skills Simulator.

But just then, he recalled he'd made a promise to Kristin the night before Rosenborg's Europa League match against the Crusaders. Without any more dilly-dallying, he picked up his phone and dialed Mr. Stein's number.

"Hello, Zachary," Mr. Stein intoned after picking up the phone almost instantaneously. "How have you been? Is everything okay?"

"I'm fine, Mr. Stein," Zachary replied. "What about you? How're you doing?"

"I'm okay and just enjoying retirement," Mr. Stein replied. "Did you give some thought to my proposal? What is your view on the idea?"

"Well," Zachary said, trying to organize his thoughts as quickly as possible. "I've thought about the idea for quite some time now and also made some consultations. It's a good idea, yes."

"But?" Mr. Stein said from the other end of the line as if he could read his mind.

Zachary sighed on hearing that before continuing. "But I think it's too early for me to be thinking about establishing an academy. I really don't want to take my focus away from football, especially during this period when I'm still growing as an athlete."

"Oh," Mr. Stein said in a relaxed tone. "That's understandable."

"But I can still consider implementing the idea in like two years," Zachary continued. "That'll even be better for us since I might have already established myself as a world-class footballer by then. Don't you think so, Mr. Stein?"

"That's a good way of thinking, Zachary," Mr. Stein replied. "We had to wait until you were ready either way. But don't forget me when your fame explodes and you become famous all over the world." He added jokingly.

"That'll never happen," Zachary said.

"Okay, that puts my heart at ease," Mr. Stein replied. "Thanks for calling, Zachary. If there's nothing else, I'll have to say goodbye since I was in the middle of a meeting."

"Okay, have a nice day, Mr. Stein," Zachary said.

"Have a nice day, too," Mr. Stein replied and then ended the call.

Zachary let out a pent-up breath of air after placing his phone on the table. He always found it hard to say no to people, especially those close to him.

Nonetheless, he was glad that he'd finally communicated his decision to Mr. Stein after battling with it for close to two months. He could finally relax and focus on football.

With a light heart, he activated the G.O.A.T Skills Simulator at the cost of two Juju-points. He practiced his dribbling and shooting skills hundreds of times inside the virtual world created by the system until it was almost time for his date with Camilla.

## Chapter 235 - Hanging Out With Camilla I

Camilla Schneider had promised herself she would never fall for another guy ever again. She'd experienced a painful heartbreak at the hands of a dashing Casanova while she was still at the university

in Freiburg. He had been perfect in every way — a true gentleman in the eyes of her naive former self. But that hadn't stopped him from shattering her heart to pieces, leaving her an emotional wreck.

From that day, she'd practically developed a phobia for relationships. She was all for the fun part without any of the earnest stuff. But over the past weeks, she'd found herself growing more and more attached to Zachary, although he was like six years her junior. He was like a storm sweeping her off the ground. She could hardly resist.

When they'd first met, she'd initially been captivated by his imposing and manly physique that could rival that of any male model out there. At that time, she'd only wanted to have fun with him without getting into anything serious. However, the more time she spent with him, the more she liked him.

She found him attractive and ever so considerate, from the depth of his eyes to the gentle expressions of his voice. He was caring from his generous compliments, though rare, to the tender touch of his hand upon her own — whenever they were intimate. Moreover, he was a very talented footballer who was rising fast in the ranks. She was finding it more and more difficult to resist his grace and charm.

"Bzzt Bzzzt! Bzzt Bzzzt!"

The sound of her phone vibrating broke her out of her reverie. Her face couldn't help but bloom into a beautiful smile when she glanced at the screen. Without hesitation, she accepted the call.

"Hello dear," she spoke into the phone after placing it next to her ear.

"Hello, Camilla," she heard Zachary reply from the other end of the line. She couldn't help but frown, wondering why he always called her by name and never by honey, dear, or any other nicknames. That wasn't a good sign.

"How are you?" Zachary continued almost without a pause.

"I'm fine," Camilla replied, her spirits brightening once again. "Just missing you. I'm waiting."

"Oh," Zachary said after a slight pause. "I miss you too. I'm on my way to Müller Bil right now. Let's meet outside—in the parking lot, in about 15 minutes? Are you ready to move?"

"Yes," Camilla was quick to reply. "I'll wait for you there. See you in a bit."

"See you," Zachary replied before ending the call. It seemed he was driving since she could hear the sound of engines roaring in the background. She guessed he would be arriving very soon.

So, she quickly shut down her computer, organized her office desk, and said goodbye to her workmates. She then rushed to the washrooms, where she touched up her lips in the bathroom mirror and made sure there was nothing amiss with her appearance. A short while later, she was in the parking lot awaiting Zachary's arrival.

"You look nice," Zachary said with a smile when he arrived a few minutes later.

"Thank you," she replied, feeling her heart begin to race. "Too bad I can't say the same for you." She added jokingly, hooking her arm with his.

He was, of course, tall and imposing and exotic — all things she relished about him. However, he was wearing a tracksuit, a jumper with a hoodie, and running sneakers — which was about as dressed up as he ever got whenever they were together.

"Why is it that you only wear tracksuits whenever we're together?" She pressed on before Zachary could respond.

"I find them comfortable," Zachary replied, scratching at his chin. "Are you saying I don't look good in tracksuits?"

"That's not it," Camilla replied hurriedly, shaking her head. "I'm sure you would look nice even if you're just in a pair of boxers or even rags. But I'm just wondering why you never try to dress up in anything else aside from tracksuits."

"Oh," Zachary said, scratching at his chin. He often did that whenever he was at a loss for words or didn't want to comment on an issue.

"Let's go shopping," Camilla heard herself say. "Let's go shopping," she repeated, inclining her head to glance at him.

"You want to go shopping?" Zachary queried, raising a brow. "Don't you want us to go for dinner?"

"Of course, I still wish to have dinner with you," Camilla replied, flashing him a smile. "But since it's still quite early, we can squeeze in a shopping trip, maybe at City Syd, and still have time for dinner later. I'll help you pick out a few articles of clothing, and it won't take us long. And one more thing. I'm the one sponsoring the shopping trip."

"Oh," Zachary said, his eyes widening as he inclined his head to glance down at her face. "You want to buy me some clothes?" He asked, pointing at himself. He seemed genuinely surprised.

"Is it so shocking that I want to buy you something?" Camilla said, pouting. "You can simply take it as a girl buying a present for the guy he likes. It's as simple as that."

"Oh," Zachary said, caressing his beard and seeming defeated by the statement.

Camilla couldn't help but chuckle at his reaction. It was priceless. It seemed like he was searching for the right words for the situation.

"Why are you laughing?" Zachary asked, cocking his head to look into her eyes.

"I'm just happy, Zachary," she replied, holding his gaze. "I'm happy to be in your company. So, can we first head to City Syd to do some shopping? Don't worry. We'll be lightning-fast—faster than a Rosenberg counterattack."

He chuckled at that. "How can I say no to some free designer clothes? Let's go." He led her to his R8 GT parked a short distance away.

Half an hour later, they were walking into a big clothing store in City Syd. Camilla wasted no time picking a few designer jeans, t-shirts, caps, and sneakers for Zachary. She insisted on him trying them on first so

that the two of them could assess whether they looked good on him. Naturally, she also wanted to get to admire him in designer clothes.

Zachary accepted begrudgingly and tried on a few outfits. God! He looked even more dashing in jeans and t-shirts. With his 6'4 physique, he could practically work as a model for any famous clothing brand.

"I can now say that you really look nice," Camilla commented after he'd tried on the fourth set of clothing. "You should wear jeans more often. They suit you better."

"Thank you." Zachary laughed, admiring himself in the mirror. "So, Miss Sponsor," he said with a bit of humor, turning towards her. "Are we going to purchase all these? Isn't it a bit much?" He pointed at the heap of clothes on the cashier's desk.

"Why are you worried?" Camilla asked, pouting. "I'm the one buying this time around. Have you seen me complaining when you take me out for expensive dinners?"

"Oh, then thanks, I guess," he said, smiling at her.

"You're welcome." Camilla returned his smile. "You look good in those clothes. They are much better than your tracksuits. Let me pay, and we can then go for dinner."

She went ahead and swiped her card at the cashier's, spending slightly over 120,000 NOK on the clothes and shoes. But she didn't flinch since that amount of money wasn't an issue for her. Instead, she relished the feeling of finally having done something for Zachary. As an accomplished woman, she didn't like the feeling of being pampered by him without giving anything substantial in return.

'Maybe, he'll think of me whenever he wears those clothes,' she thought as she turned around after making the payment. 'It's a good investment.'



Zachary kept stealing glances at Camilla as he was arranging the shopping bags in the boot of his R8 GT. He was used to always being the sponsor in all the relationships of his past life. It had, thus, come as a shock to him that Camilla was willing to spend over 120,000 NOK on him. She sure was strange.

'Do I really look shabby in my tracksuits?' He wondered whether that was what had compelled her to purchase the clothes for him. He stole a few more glances at Camilla as he continued placing the bags in the boot.

"Is there something on my face?" Camilla asked after noticing his weird behavior.

"I'm just admiring your beauty," Zachary said, sighing and closing the boot. He'd finally finished arranging all the shopping bags in the vehicle. "Am I not allowed to do that?"

Camilla chuckled, stepping towards him. "Let's go for dinner," she said, giving him a peck on the cheek. "After that, you can admire me all you want." She said in a sensual voice that tickled at Zachary's senses before stepping back.

Zachary could only let loose a deep sigh as he admired her from his vantage point at arm's reach. The corners of her full lips had just curled up into a megawatt, no a gigawatt of a smile that accentuated her beauty under the rays of the setting sun. In her flowing cashmere summer dress, which matched the green in her eyes, she looked otherworldly. Zachary was starting to believe she was the most astonishing girl he had ever met in both his lives.

"Let's head to dinner," he said after a short while, letting out a breath. He then opened the passenger door of the R8 GT for her. He'd decided to put all the etiquette he'd learned watching James Bond movies into practice.

Camilla chuckled, beaming. "Thank you," she said as she stepped into the vehicle with grace.

But just then, Zachary's sharp ears seemed to pick up the snapping sound of a camera shutter. He quickly looked around, frowning. But he didn't see anyone with a camera nearby. All the people in the City Syd parking lot were busy doing their own things. They weren't giving him any second glances since a good fraction of his face was covered by the visor of his cap. He concluded that his ears had heard wrong, and he was worrying over nothing.

"Is anything the matter?" Camilla asked from the front seat of the R8 GT.

"It's probably nothing," Zachary replied, taking one final glance around. "Let's go have dinner." He got into the driver's seat and steered the vehicle out of the parking lot.

An hour later, the two of them were already seated in the cozy restaurant of the Scandic Nidelven Hotel, enjoying a sumptuous French dinner.

Camilla was having a wonderful time listening to Zachary's narration of Rosenborg's match in Belfast — while occasionally admiring the reflection of the moon on the waters of the Nidelven River through the window. The food was delicious, the ambiance of the place exquisite, and the company the best she'd had in a long time. It was a perfect evening, and she hoped it could end even better.

"So, I've always wanted to ask but never gotten the perfect opportunity," she heard Zachary say, his voice wavering.

"Go on and ask," Camilla said, flashing him an encouraging smile.

"Where exactly are you from?" He asked, looking up at her face. "Is it Russia?"

"Oh my, God, no," Camilla replied, suppressing a chuckle. She was glad Zachary had finally started asking her some more personal questions. "What gave you the impression that I'm from Russia?"

"Your accent. It's unique."

"I get that often," Camilla said, sighing. "But I'm not Russian. My mother tongue is not even Russian but the Czech language. It's quite different from Russian."

"Oh," Zachary said after sipping on his juice. "So, you're from the Czech Republic then?"

"Yes and no," she replied, glancing at him from across the table. "My mom is from Prague. So, I spent my early years there with her. That's the reason for my accent. But I later moved to Germany to live with my dad during my teenage years. So, I'm both a citizen of Germany and the Czech Republic."

"Oh," Zachary said, smiling. "I really believed you were Russian. But then, that still leaves the mystery; how come you're working here in Norway now?"

"That's because Audi posted me here in Norway," she replied matter-of-factly. "I've actually been in Trondheim for only about a year and a half. Is there anything else that you would like to know about me? Just go ahead and ask." She gave him an encouraging smile.

Zachary then went ahead and asked her about her career. She replied honestly, telling him she had previously worked as a model while still in school, long before joining the marketing team of Audi. She explained why she'd abandoned her modeling career, citing the pressure from her family.

The minutes passed by quickly since she was doing the narrating, and soon it was time to head home. Zachary, of course, covered the bill, and a few minutes later, they were well on their way to Camilla's apartment in Lade.

"Thanks for the wonderful time, Zachary," she said after he'd pulled up in the parking space in front of her apartment building. "I really enjoyed the evening."

"I'm glad you enjoyed it," Zachary replied, smiling at her.

"Do you want to come up and have a coffee?" She said, inclining her head and looking into his eyes. "It's not yet even eight in the night. So, we still have a lot of time on our hands."

"Oh, okay," he said, nodding solemnly and stepping out of the car. "Let's go up and have that coffee."

"Great."

But they ended up having a different version of coffee.

As soon as they'd stepped through the entrance of her apartment, Zachary grabbed her and started kissing her. The next instant, they were falling all over each other, knocking over the furniture in her living room. A few minutes later, Camilla found herself drowning in an endless, gratifying tunnel of ecstasy. She was without a care for the world as they explored each other's limits until she lay limp in his arms.

## Chapter 237 - Receiving The July Player Of The Month Accolade

Zachary left Camilla's place the following morning, feeling refreshed and charged with boundless energy. He felt like he'd just returned from another vacation. So, he didn't waste time immersing himself back into an intensive practice routine to prepare for the game against Sogndal.

For the next few days, he focused solely on training and forgot all other distractions and pastimes. As a supplement to the official team sessions, he continued jogging five kilometers in the morning and refining his shooting in the evening. He also didn't forget to practice within the system simulator's virtual world to hone his dribbling and set-piece skills. He was the living definition of an exercise maniac — to the point that some of the coaches expressed worry about his schedule.

"Zachary," Coach Henriksen called out to him as he was practicing his set-piece technique on the Saturday evening before the match against Sogndal. "I think you've already practiced enough. You should go home and rest so that you can be at your best during tomorrow's game. You'll burn yourself out if you don't take rest seriously."

"Don't worry, coach," he replied, dispatching another curling free-kick over the training mannequins — towards the empty goal. "I only need to shoot ten more balls to finish my practice for the day. So, I'll be resting very soon." He added, smiling and nodding to himself after the ball had homed into the back of the net.

He was obviously not worried that he would burn himself out because of the simple free-kick training. He'd already consumed a weekly dosage of a B-graded physical conditioning elixir. So, he was brimming with what seemed like an endless amount of energy at that moment. Besides, his stamina and endurance had already made breakthroughs to the S- grading. He was sure he could handle a few extra hours of training each day.

Coach Henriksen, the assistant head coach of Rosenborg, could only sigh and shake his head after hearing Zachary's response. The young Maestro was talented and highly motivated for sure. But he also had a weakness of immersing himself in training and forgetting about his resting schedule. Out of the entire squad, he spent the most time on the playing ground, practicing simple routines over and over again for hours.

That evening was no different.

Coach Johansen had conducted the pre-match tactical meeting earlier that day to give the players plenty of time to rest before the match the following evening. However, Zachary had gone ahead and utilized that time for free kick practice. He seemed to have even forgotten he was part of the starting line for the upcoming game that was only hours away.

Coach Henriksen was worried Rosenborg's best player would injure himself if he didn't tone down his training. So, he decided to bring up the issue to the head coach when they'd just concluded a planning meeting the following morning.

"Let him be," Coach Johansen replied after hearing him out. "I've observed Zachary from his academy days, and I'm sure that he has got an almost total awareness of the functioning of his body. So, if he's putting in a few more hours of free-kick training, it means he can handle it. So, don't worry too much about him."

"Oh," Coach Henriksen said, sighing. He'd done his part and informed the coach of a potential problem. If he didn't want to address it, there was nothing that he could do.

"Zachary's issue aside," he continued before the coach could rush off back to his office. "There are three promising young players on the under-19 squad. We should assess them to see if they are ready to join the senior team."

That stopped the head coach in his tracks. "Who are they?" he asked, turning around to give Coach Henriksen his full attention once again.

"One is an African called Kasongo Paul," Coach Henriksen replied right away. "The other two are brothers from Sweden. They go by the names of Paul and Kendrick Otterson."

"Oh," Coach Johansen said, smiling. "Those are Zachary's friends. But they were not as hard-working and talented as he was during their academy days. Have they finally shaped up into skilled players after joining the under-19 team?"

The corners of Coach Henriksen's mouth could not help but twitch slightly on hearing the head coach's remarks. He wondered how the coach could compare any other young player with a monster such as Zachary. That was pure madness for sure.

"The three of them have been phenomenal over the past few months," he said with a smile after a moment. "Kasongo possesses great pace on the flanks and will mature into a very talented winger in the near future. He has scored four goals and made six assists since his debut for the under-19 team."

"Kendrick Otterson, the goalkeeper, managed to seal his position as the starting goalkeeper for the under-19s right after his debut," he continued without giving Coach Johansen a chance to interject. "He has incredible reflexes that make him very exceptional in goal. You need to see him for yourself in action to understand what I mean."

"Paul Otterson seems to be the least talented of the three on paper. But after watching a few of his performances, I discovered something delightful. He has a great sense of positioning, especially in the box. He's a natural number-9. He gives me similar vibes to those of a player like Ruud Van Nistelrooy on the pitch. He's a bit laid back, yes, but he's a phenomenal finisher."

"Oh, that's great news," Coach Johansen said, his face morphing into a smile. "Let's do it like this. You can go ahead and continue assessing their performances over the course of this month. If they maintain their form throughout the entire month, I'll give them a chance to train with the first team."

"That's a good call," Coach Henriksen said, nodding and grinning. "I'll go ahead and inform the under-19 coach to give them plenty of opportunities during this month."

"Good."

"There is one more thing, Coach Johansen," Coach Henriksen continued. "How far with the acquisition of new defenders? Are you making any progress in the transfer market?"

"Yes, there's some considerable progress," Coach Johansen said, grinning. "Four talented young players will be joining our ranks very soon. I can't be sure exactly when, but they've promised to arrive in Trondheim by the third week of August. So, we can finally say goodbye to our defensive struggles."

"Oh," Coach Henriksen said, eyes widening. "Those are some lightning-fast transfer deals. Are the players really talented?"

Coach Johansen smiled. "From what I have seen, they'll surely boost our defensive capabilities in a short while. I've got no doubt about their skills and talents."

"Then that's some good news," Coach Henriksen said, nodding. "I'm glad you managed to find them. That puts my heart at ease."

"Okay, if there's nothing else, I'll have to head back to the office and do some work," Coach Johansen said. "In the meantime, you can take charge and make sure everything is in order for the match against Sogndal today evening."

"Don't worry, and just focus on your work," Coach Henriksen replied with a smile. "I'll ensure that everything is in order as soon as possible."

That very Sunday evening at six, Zachary and his teammates welcomed Sogndal Idrettslag at Lerkendal for the 18th match of the Tippeligaen season.

Zachary was surprised by the passion of the fans as he walked out of the tunnel onto the pitch. They were already going crazy and singing popular Rosenborg victory chants even before the commencement of the game. He couldn't help but feel sorry for his opponents, the Sogndal players, who had to play under such a hostile atmosphere.

"Please give a round of applause for Zachary Bemba, the best player for the month of July," the commentator announced right after the teams had finished exchanging handshakes in the middle of the pitch. "He will be receiving his bronze statuette from the Norsk Toppfotball officials before the kick-off today."

"Zachary, \*Clap\*Clap\*, Zachary, \*Clap\*Clap\*, Zachary, \*Clap\*Clap..."

The fans became even more animated after hearing the announcement. They chanted Zachary's name at the top of their lungs and clapped their hands rhythmically like there was no tomorrow. For the next minute, it was sheer madness in the stands occupied by the Rosenberg supporters.

Zachary was intoxicated with joy when he took in their cheers. Even in the center of the playing field, he could feel their passion and intensity as they chanted his name. So, he waved at them before slowly making his way to the sidelines to receive his award.

"Congratulations upon your amazing July performance," an aged man that Zachary couldn't recognize said after handing him the player of the month bronze statuette. "Keep up the good work, and you'll soon rise to great heights." The man patted his back.

"Thank you," Zachary replied, receiving the prize. He posed with the aged man and the bronze statuette for a few photographs. Without wasting a second, he handed his award to one of the coaching assistants for safekeeping before jogging back to his attacking midfield position on the pitch.

"Congratulations, Zachary," Nicki Nielsen said after walking up to his position right outside the center circle in Rosenberg's half. "You deserve the award as you were beyond incredible during July."

"Thank you," Zachary responded with a smile.

"But you know one thing, Zachary," Nicki said, grinning like a rogue.

"Yes," Zachary replied, raising a brow.

"They say that every player who receives a best of something award will have a below-par performance immediately after," Nicki continued with a bit of humor. "That's unless the athlete first moves around his home team's ground dancing with his award. So, you better do the same — if you don't wish to lose your form during today's game."



"Go away and don't jinx my game," Zachary said, raising his leg as if he wanted to kick the Rosenborg number-9.

Nicki laughed, jumping away from Zachary. "Don't say that I didn't warn you," he said, still grinning and stepping further away. "I'm only looking out for you, man."

"Just return to your position and leave me alone, man," Zachary said, shaking his head. "Those superstitions don't work on me. I'm sure I'll play like usual."

Chapter 238 - Against Sogndal Idrettslag

\*FWEEEEEEEE\*

The referee blew the whistle at exactly 6:00 PM. The Tippeligaen match between Rosenborg Ballklub and Sogndal Idrettslag commenced immediately.

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Coach Johansen was pleased with the performance of his players right from the very first minute. They seemed to still be on form and began the game strongly by launching a series of deadly attacks.

They quickly grew into the game and rendered the Sogndal players helpless with brilliant wing play and lightning-fast counterattacks. As a Result, Rosenborg's first solid chance to score came very early in the first half.

In the fifth minute, Stefan Strandberg, the Rosenborg center back, made a mistake while passing the ball to the keeper. He misplaced his backpass, which resulted in a Sogndal corner. Luckily, it came to nothing, and on the break, Zachary found Mikael Dorsin via Nicki Nielsen on the opposite wing. The Rosenborg signature counter was on.

The cheering in Lerkendal rose to a thunderous crescendo.

Sogndal's defense tried to press Mikael Dorsin on the left flank but paid dearly. Mikael managed to find Nicki Nielsen at the far post with a low teasing cross that left the keeper helpless.

Nicki Nielsen, Rosenborg's number-9, didn't disappoint. He volleyed the ball low into the net, leaving Erik Dahlin, the Sogndal goalkeeper, stranded.

"GOOAAAAL...."

In Rosenborg's technical area, Coach Johansen shouted at the top of his voice. His spirits were flying high. His players had managed to make another incredible start, scoring in just the 9th minute. Nicki was already en route to the corner flag to celebrate. But the next moment—

\*FWEEEEEEE\*

He heard the referee blow the whistle, and then the cheering started dying down. It was as if a sinister force had slowly washed across the stands of Lerkendal Stadium, snuffing out the passionate voices of the Rosenborg fans.

Coach Johansen looked around, confused. "What happened?" he mumbled, finally glancing towards the linesman to ascertain the cause of the confusion. His eyes widened the next instant as he finally registered the fact that the linesman's flag was up.

"What the f\*ck? Offside?" He roared the next moment, placing his hands at the back of his head. His face had already morphed into a frown so foreboding. It could even have worked well as a Halloween costume. "How is that an offside? Clearly, Nicki was still onside when Mikael was releasing the ball. How can that be an offside?"

He was momentarily disconcerted. He ran to the fourth official to protest and rectify what he thought was a crystal-clear refereeing mistake. But, the fourth official just waved away his complaints and sent him back to the technical area like he was a nuisance.

For several seconds, Coach Johansen could practically feel rage pulsing through his veins. He was sure the referees had made an incorrect decision in denying his team a goal. But, since he was an experienced coach, he managed to suppress his anger and continue watching the game after a few more minutes.

However, the progress of the game over the next thirty minutes did little to improve his mood. It was like the referee's decision to deny Nicki's effort had jinxed the game for the Troll Kids.

The Rosenberg players continued pushing forward in droves, launching non-stop attacks on the opponents. Be that as it may, the Sogndal players remained unwavering in their defense and kept Rosenberg at bay for the entire first half. They'd even double-teamed Zachary and managed to reduce his impact on the field of play.

The score was still 0:0 as the players headed to the dressing room for halftime.

"Guys, can I have your attention," Coach Johansen yelled as soon as his players finished settling down in the dressing room. "Let's get on with this since we have limited time."

The players responded quickly, taking their seats around the dressing room while chugging down some water. Coach Johansen could tell that their morale was low. He went ahead and gave them a ten-minute pep-talk to lift their spirits before touching on the game plan once again and sending them off to the field of play.

But, even after the halftime pep talk, the score remained deadlocked at 0:0 as the game progressed to the final minutes of the second half. Rosenberg's players continued to put up an incredible display, sustaining the pressure on their opponents throughout the second half. They attacked with an intensity that kept all the fans and the coaching staff on tenterhooks.

It always seemed Rosenberg was close to scoring the opening and winning goal. However, it never materialized. The ball smashed off the post countless times, giving rise to a chorus of collective sighs from the stands of Lerkendal Stadion. At other times, the keeper made incredible saves, causing the Rosenberg players more frustration.

Coach Johansen was at a loss of what to do as the game entered extra time. He couldn't blame the score sheet on the players since they'd dictated the tempo from the very start. They'd done their best and come close to scoring several times. But it seemed luck wasn't on their side that evening.

"For the first time like in like forever, Rosenborg has failed to obtain maximum points from a Tippeligaen fixture," Kasongo and the Ottersons heard the TV2 sports presenter announce. They'd just switched on their television right after returning home from a late practice with the under-19 team.

"Rosenborg has failed to defeat Sogndal!" Paul Otterson, Zachary's former teammate in the academy, exclaimed, casting his gaze on the screen. "How could that happen?"

"Shhhh!" The other two silenced him with a wave of their hands. Their gazes were also on the television screen.

"Not even the likes of Zachary and Nicki Nielsen managed to penetrate Sogndal's defense in today's game," the presenter continued, his voice loud and clear through the television speakers. "This is a shocking result that has brought Rosenborg's prolonged winning streak to a halt."

"Moreover, after this draw, the point gap between the Tippeligaen table's first and second has reduced from eight to six points. Rosenborg has taken their tally to 44 points and is still the table leader. On the other hand, Strømsgodset has 38 points after winning the game against Sarpsborg-08 earlier today. If Strømsgodset can win against Rosenborg next Sunday, they'll lessen the gap to only three points."

"What is your take on the table, Kjell?" The presenter asked, turning towards one of the pundits in the studio. "Do you think Strømsgodset can cut down the point difference further and put some pressure on Rosenborg?"

"That can indeed happen," Kjell Roar answered. "Rosenborg has a busy schedule in these final few months of the season. For instance, they have to play Crusaders in the Europa League qualifying round on Wednesday before facing off against Strømsgodset away the following Sunday. Just last Wednesday, they were playing away in Northern Ireland. These consecutive matches are likely to cause the performance of their players to go down a notch as fatigue levels start building up. So, I'm making the bold prediction that Rosenborg will lose points again very soon."

"Oh, thank you for your analysis, Kjell," the presenter said, smiling. "But before we dive into the analysis of the game," the presenter continued. "Let's first take you back to Lerkendal Stadium, where our reporter, Olav Brusveen, is about to interview Boyd Johansen, the head coach of Rosenborg. Stay tuned."

The next moment, the studio image disappeared from the television screen. Within an instant, the frowning face of Coach Johansen, with his signature red beard, populated the entire screen.

"Good evening, coach," the reporter said, holding up a microphone to Coach Johansen. "Could you tell us your assessment of the game? I'm sure all the supporters were expecting another commanding Rosenborg performance in today's match. But your players only managed a draw. What happened?"

"Well," Coach Johansen replied with a sigh. "It's football, and anything can happen on the pitch. Sometimes it's up to luck. Other times, it's up to the referees to influence the result. What a team can do is to go on the field of play and do their best. They can only leave the end result to a higher power or the referees, in some instances. And I'm proud of my players for doing just that. They dictated the tempo from the very first minute and created several chances at goal. They were clearly the better team on the playing field, despite not getting that winning goal."

"Do you think that the draw could have resulted from fatigue building up among the players?"

"Did you watch the match?" Coach Johansen countered with his own question, frowning slightly.

"Yes," the reporter replied.

"Then tell me," the coach said, tone demanding. "Did those Rosenborg players look fatigued to you on the playing field?"

"No, coach," the reporter replied.

"Then why are you asking me this question?" The coach said, seemingly displeased. "You shouldn't make baseless conclusions. Rosenborg has the most versatile squad in the whole Tippeligaen. Because of that, we can easily make rotations and keep the squad fresh and energetic throughout the entire season. So, fatigue is not a word in our vocabulary."

"Okay, thank you, coach, for taking the time to answer our questions," the reporter said. "We wish you good luck in the upcoming fixtures."

Coach Johansen's image then disappeared from the screen and was replaced by a close-up of the TV2 Studio.

"Kjell, I think that you are wrong this time," the TV2 sports presenter said with a smile. "Coach Johansen has made it clear that the word fatigue does not exist in the Rosenborg vocabulary. So, can you please withdraw your opinion and stop misleading our viewers."

"Well," Kjell Roar, the pundit, said, smiling. "I do hope that our good coach is sure about what he's talking about this time. And I'm willing to give him the benefit of the doubt if he can beat the Crusaders during mid-week and Strømsgodset next Sunday. If he can do that, I'll withdraw my prediction on-air and apologize to him. But for now, I still believe that my conjecture is the most likely reason for Rosenborg's below-par performance in today's fixture."

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"Do you guys think Rosenborg is in trouble?" Kendrick Otterson asked the other two after turning down the volume of the television.

"Nah," Kasongo replied, tone confident. "They've got Zachary on the squad. So there isn't a need to worry. He will manage to find a way to help Rosenborg win a lot more often."

## Chapter 239 - Once Again Against Strømsgodset

Coach Johansen decided to bench his star players for the Europa League return leg fixture against the Crusaders Football Club the following Wednesday. Zachary Bemba, Nicki Nielsen, Mikael Dorsin, Tobias Mikkelsen, Tore Reginiussen, and Borek Dockal watched the game from the sidelines. But, the Troll Kids still managed to put up an outstanding defense-minded performance to beat Crusaders 1:0 despite the absence of most of their regular first-team players. Peter Ankersen, a right-back usually on the bench, scored the only goal for the Troll Kids, sending them into the next stage of the Europa League qualifying round.

Coach Johansen was in a good mood since the win cast away the shadow of the weekend's goalless-draw against Sogndal. It practically reignited the spirits of the Rosenborg players. So they headed into the Sunday Tippeligaen fixture against Strømsgodset with boundless momentum. They were eager to thrash the team from Drammen again and extend their lead at the top of the table to nine points.

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"Oh, my goodness me!" Erik Bailly exclaimed, his gaze roaming across the passionate fans around the stands of the Marienlyst Stadion in Drammen. "What an electrifying atmosphere! These Rosenborg fans are incredible. They can manage to be this energetic even when their team is playing away!"

"That's a given," his agent replied, smiling and also looking around. "Rosenborg has dominated Norwegian football for a very long time. So, it has quite a number of passionate fans spread all over the country. Moreover, this is a match between the first and second on the table. That could have also added to the excitement."

"Oh!" Erik Bailly said, smiling and nodding. "It would be exciting to play for Rosenborg if the fans are always this passionate."

The young Ivorian center-back had just arrived in Trondheim a day before for a medical. That was after agreeing on personal terms with the Rosenborg representatives. But he'd decided to travel to Drammen and watch a live Rosenborg game first – to ascertain whether he was making the correct decision. His heart wouldn't rest easy until he'd witnessed Zachary's prowess with his own eyes.

"Hello there," he heard a voice calling out to him just as he was about to take his seat beside his agent. He turned around and was surprised to find a familiar face standing just behind him.

"You're Thomas, Thomas Partey?" He probed without masking his astonishment. He'd, of course, already met the young Ghanaian defensive midfielder when his team, Espanyol B, had faced off against Atlético Madrid B the previous season. But he was just perplexed to see him at the Marienlyst Stadion in Drammen, Norway.

"That's me," Thomas replied, grinning and extending his hand. "It's nice to meet you again, Erik. How have you been?"

"I'm fine," Erik replied, also grinning and taking the hand for a firm handshake. "But what are you doing here? Aren't you supposed to be training with the

Atlético Madrid B side to prepare for the Segunda División B season opener?"

"I could ask you the same thing," Thomas said as he settled in a seat right beside him. "Aren't you supposed to be in Barcelona, training with the Espanyol B side? What are you doing here in Norway?"

Erik Bailly couldn't help but grin on hearing the Ghanaian defensive midfielder counter with his own question. For a brief moment, he held Thomas' gaze, and the two of them smiled as they seemed to come to a sort of understanding.

"So, did you watch the videos too?" Erik queried after a short while, also settling down in his seat.

"Yes, I did," Thomas was quick to reply. "In this generation of ours, I have only seen two players before who could play like that when they were still eighteen years old. That guy is surely a monster. I decided to join Rosenborg right after watching him play."

"Oh," Erik said, his eyes widening with surprise. "So, have you already signed for Rosenborg?"

"Yes, of course," Thomas replied matter-of-factly. "I signed the contract on Friday afternoon. I'm already searching for an apartment in Trondheim."

"Eehh," Erik said, giving the Ghanaian defensive midfielder a sideways glance. "You're quite decisive."

"Why would I dilly-dally after being offered a chance to be on the same team with such a monster?" Thomas countered with a question of his own once again. "So, I take it that you haven't signed for Rosenborg yet?"

"That's right," Erik replied, sighing. "I wanted to watch today's game first before taking the medical tomorrow. But seeing you here came as a great shock to me. By the way, this man here is Graziano Battistini, my agent." He added, patting the shoulder of the suited man on his left.



"Oh," Thomas said, inclining his head to observe the man in a suit. "I'm Thomas Partey. Nice to meet you, sir." He extended his hand over Erik's legs.

"Nice to meet you too, young man," the agent replied with a smile, taking the hand. "I'm glad to make your acquaintance..."

But before he could continue the conversation, a thunderous cheer rose from the stands around them, drowning out all the other sounds in the stadium. At long last, the players were matching into the pitch. The three of them could only halt their discussion since the game's opening ceremony was about to commence.

\*FWEEEEEEE\*

The referee blew the whistle at exactly 6:00 PM to signal the start of the game between Strømsgodset IF and Rosenborg BK. Without any dilly-dallying, Ola Kamara, the Strømsgodset center-forward, kicked the ball back into his midfield as the cheers around the Marienlyst Stadion rose to a thunderous crescendo.

Both teams were highly motivated since they were vying to become Tippeligaen champions that season. The Rosenborg players wanted to cement their position at the top of the Tippeligaen table by taking their tally to 47 points. On the other hand, Strømsgodset hoped to win the game and cut down the point difference between themselves and Rosenborg to only three points. Thus, the energy levels on the pitch were incredible. Both teams struggled to dictate the tempo early in the first half.

Zachary had rested the entire week since he hadn't participated in the mid-week game against Crusaders Football Club. He was brimming with energy and was all over the pitch, playing the role of a playmaker to link defense and attack. He even managed to initiate Rosenborg's first chance at goal in the 12th minute.

After receiving a lofted pass from Mikael Dorsin, the Rosenborg left-back, he skipped past a sliding tackle from Abdisalam Ibrahim, the Strømsgodset right midfielder, managing to create a yard of space for himself in central midfield. He immediately dashed across the middle third like the wind, slaloming his way past two more opponents.

Before any more opponents could close him down, he unleashed one of his signature through-passes into space — just behind the Strømsgodset defensive line. With that well-timed ball, he managed to send Nicki Nielsen, the Rosenborg number-9, on a straight course towards the goal.

Nicki Nielsen connected with Zachary's sweet pass just at the edge of the box. Without any dilly-dallying, he stepped into the box before looping Adam Kwarasey, the Strømsgodset keeper, to send the ball towards the back of the net.

However, before the ball could cross the goal line, Lars Christopher Vilsvik, the Strømsgodset right-back, came sliding in to send the ball out of play. A collective sigh rose from the stands occupied by the Rosenborg fans as the referee pointed to the corner flag.

In the 13th minute, Rosenborg had missed a clear chance to take the lead in the highly contested game between the first and second on the Tippeligaen table.

"I already told you to mark both Zachary and Nicki throughout the entire game," Ronny Deila, the Strømsgodset head coach, roared from the sidelines. He was still anxious even though the ball had gone out for a Rosenborg corner kick.

"Why aren't you guys following my instructions and doing the needful? Concentrate. Don't allow any of them even an inch of space when we aren't on the ball."

"Abdisalam and Nana," the Strømsgodset coach continued yelling. "You two should double team Zachary whenever we lose possession. Make sure he doesn't release those passes of his behind our defensive line. And stop him from making any runs through the midfield..."

He kept on shouting as he paced the length of the technical area to make sure his players were in shape before the recommencement of the game.

\*FWEEEEEEEE\*

The referee finally blew the whistle and signaled for Rosenborg to take the corner after organizing the players in the box.

Coach Ronny Deila could feel his heart hammering hard with anxiety as he watched Mikael Dorsin float a teasing ball into the crowded box. His muscles grew even tenser as he watched Tore Reginiussen, the Rosenborg captain, outjump the rest of the players in the box to connect with the corner ball. The coach really thought that Rosenborg was about to score and take the lead early in the first half. But the next moment—

"BANG!"

The ball smashed off the right post before bouncing back into the field of play. Coach Ronny Deila let out a pent-up breath of air as his team had narrowly survived conceding in the 15th minute. But his eyes narrowed the next instant as he watched a Rosenborg player pounce on the rebound after outmaneuvering two Strømsgodset players. The danger had not yet passed.

#### Chapter 240 - On The Back Foot

Zachary reacted as soon as he saw Nicki Nielsen, the Rosenborg center-forward, pounce on the rebound from the corner ball. He shrugged off Abdisalam Ibrahim, the Strømsgodset midfielder marking him — and stepped into a pocket of free space in the crowded box. With his nearly instantaneous reaction, he'd managed to open himself up to receive a pass in the next two seconds — before the opponents could close him down once more.

His chemistry with Nicki on the pitch had always been incredible. The number-9 managed to spot him almost instantly. Without wasting time, the center forward relinquished the ball to him with a teasing flick over the head of an opposing player.

Zachary was aware that the opposing players would be upon him the next second. So, he didn't even pause to control the ball. He just smashed it on it volley right away — to unleash a missile of a shot towards goal from around the edge of the penalty area.

Regrettably, a couple of Strømsgodset players threw themselves in the path of his shot the next instant. They managed to block the ball, sending it out of play to deny Rosenborg another chance to score in the 17th minute. The referee immediately pointed to the corner flag once again.

Mikael Dorsin, the Rosenborg left-back, took the corner quickly. He floated another tricky ball into the crowded box. However, Jørgen Horn, the Strømsgodset number-5, managed to outwit his opponents and leap high to clear the corner ball away from his goal with a powerful header.

The ball soared high above the players in the box before starting its descent towards the touchline on the left flank a few seconds later. It was a rare chance for Strømsgodset to counterattack since almost all the Rosenborg players hadn't reorganized themselves into a proper defensive shape yet. They'd just started making their way from Strømsgodset's box after the corner kick.

Muhamed Keita, the Strømsgodset left-forward, who hadn't taken part in defending against the corner kick, reacted immediately to the clearance from his teammate. He bolted like a cheetah on a hunt and managed to bring the ball under control with an outstretched boot — just before it could move out of play for a throw-in.

From there, he didn't look back as he initiated a rare Strømsgodset counterattack. He rushed along the touchline like a bullet train on the rails, leaving both opponents and teammates in the dust. His pace with the ball was incredible. It enabled him to step in the final third a couple of seconds later amid the rising cheers of the Strømsgodset fans.

Without losing a second, he began cutting into the pitch, skipping past a challenge from Stefan Strandberg, one of Rosenborg's center-backs, and continuing on towards Rosenborg's goal like a whirlwind. He went on to unleash a through-pass behind the rest of the defenders.

The cheers around the Marienlyst Stadion rose to a booming crescendo as Ola Kamara, Strømsgodset's center forward, shrugged off another Rosenborg defender and connected with the through-pass. Without losing a moment, he raced towards the goal and was soon one-on-one with the keeper.

Zachary could feel his heart hammering hard with tension in his chest as he raced back towards Rosenborg's box. He hadn't yet given up on defending against the Strømsgodset counterattack.

But before he could cross the boundary of the middle third, he saw Ola Kamara lift his foot and smash the ball towards the goal. So, he immediately stopped in his tracks, sighing with resignation as he watched the ball curl past the despairing dive of Daniel Rønlund, the Rosenborg keeper. As expected, it deflected off the left post before homing into the back of the net.

STR?MSGODSET IF 1 : ROSENBORG BK 0

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Kristin sighed, shaking her head after taking a glance at the score on the stadium's jumbotron. She'd traveled to Drammen together with Monica Rønning, her flatmate, with anticipation of watching her team thrash the second on the table once again. But the game was progressing in a way Kristin hadn't expected. Rosenborg was already on the back foot — even early on in the first half. That made her anxious and jittery since she feared that her team might lose points once more.

"Str?msgodset has done it," he heard Kjell Roar, the commentator for the day, yell at the top of his voice as the cheers started dying down in the stands of the Marienlyst Stadion. "The boys from Drammen have gone ahead and given team Rosenborg a taste of their own medicine. They managed to launch a counter successfully against the counterattacking kings themselves. They've scored a brilliant opening goal in this Tippeligaen fixture. I can still feel my entire being pulsing with excitement on recalling the lightning-fast counter."

"Yes, I feel the same way," Ragnar Dokken, the pundit for the day, chipped in. "That was counterattacking football played to perfection. Both Muhamed Keita, the Str?msgodset left-forward, and Ola Kamara, the center-forward, were incredible and clinical during the attack. That's why Str?msgodset is already leading by a goal to nil in the 19th minute."

"But the fault also lies with the Rosenborg squad," Kjell Roar chimed in with an audible sigh. "I'm finding it hard to believe that Rosenborg, a team that thrashed Str?msgodset 4:0 in the first leg, can concede a goal on such a counter. Maybe, the players are really starting to get fatigued by the tight schedule."

"Nah," Ragnar Dokken said. "Any team, whether strong or weak, can concede on the counter. It all depends on how efficient the opponents are during the counterattack. The Str?msgodset players were super effective in driving the ball forward to score. I believe that this goal resulted from the brilliance of the Str?msgodset players, particularly Muhamed Keita and Ola Kamara. I also believe that the Rosenborg players weren't at fault since they've been dictating the tempo from the first minute..."

"Exactly," Kristin concurred on hearing the pundit's match analysis. She was in total agreement that the goal had nothing to do with the negligence of the Rosenborg players. She believed Strømsgodset had just been lucky to score on the counter.

"As things stand right now, the difference between the first and second on the table is only three points," she heard Kjell Roar continue his commentary. "Strømsgodset now has 41 points while Rosenborg is still stuck on 44 points on the live Tippeligaen table. The Strømsgodset players will be back in the race for the Tippeligaen trophy if they can maintain this lead until the final whistle..."

"Dream on," Kristin mumbled, shaking her head. She believed with a hundred percent conviction that Rosenborg would emerge as the victors at the end of that Tippeligaen season. With Zachary, Nicki, and Tore on the team, she was sure the Troll Kids would win at the very least nine out of the remaining eleven fixtures. So, unless Strømsgodset could win all their remaining games, they had to forget about that season's Tippeligaen trophy. With a light heart, she returned her focus to the proceedings on the field of play.

As the game progressed towards the late stages of the first half, Zachary noticed that Nana Boateng and Abdisalam Ibrahim, the two Strømsgodset attacking midfielders, were double-teaming him. When he would rush to the wings, they would follow. At other times, when he would head back to his own half — to defend, they would still follow. They were practically not allowing him even half a yard of free space by shadowing his every move on the playing field.

In the meantime, the rest of the Strømsgodset players had arrayed themselves in a defensive flat 4-5-1 formation. At every point in the game, there were always five players forming almost a straight line in the defensive midfield to shut down the passing angles of the Rosenborg players. Even when their two attacking midfielders would follow Zachary to the Rosenborg half, the two players on the flanks would pinch into the spaces to ensure that the formation remained intact. They seemed keenly intent on defending by parking the bus — to hold on to their 1:0 lead until the final whistle.

However, Zachary didn't want to let them have their way. He started making erratic and unpredictable runs across the pitch — to tire out the two midfielders shadowing his every move. He was sure he would outrun them by relying on his stamina and endurance attributes that'd already made a breakthrough to the S- grade.

As expected, the two Strømsgodset players began losing focus after the first fifteen minutes of the second half. They allowed Zachary a couple of yards after failing to keep up with his pace on several occasions. Zachary didn't disappoint and managed to run with the ball for a few yards before unleashing defense splitting passes to Nicki on those instances. However, the Strømsgodset defense that consisted of basically seven players was sharp and managed to thwart Rosenborg's chances of scoring an equalizing goal.

Zachary didn't mind, though. He was confident he would create a goal-scoring opportunity very soon since his markers were already on their last legs. However, the Strømsgodset coach snuffed out his confidence in the 65th minute.

Ronny Deila, the head coach of Strømsgodset, introduced two substitutes in place of Nana Boateng and Abdisalam Ibrahim, the two midfielders that'd been marking him. Without losing a moment, those introduced midfielders started shadowing his every move once again.

'What to do?' Zachary mused, tamping down his irritation and stepping away from the two overly energetic Strømsgodset midfielders.

He was back to square one once again.

He had two new bodyguards who had fresh legs on the playing field. Yet, he couldn't use the tactic of tiring them out once more. If he did that, he would exhaust himself rather than the two substitutes.

"Zachary," Coach Johansen yelled from Rosenborg's technical area after the ball had headed out of play for a throw-in. "Come here for a moment. Hurry before play restarts."

Zachary, of course, reacted to the summon immediately. He raced to the sidelines like the wind and was soon standing before the coach.

"Come closer," Coach Johansen said, beckoning him towards himself. "I don't want those clowns to listen to what I've got to say to you."

"Oh!" Zachary said, casting a glance behind him. He was surprised that his two bodyguards had followed him to the sidelines. He couldn't help but wonder what kind of instructions they'd received from their

coach. That was because they were like mindless robots that followed him everywhere — even towards the technical area. They were taking their defending task to the extreme.

But he quickly pushed the astonishment aside and lent an ear to the coach. He only had a few seconds to receive instructions before the game restarted with a Rosenberg throw-in.