

## Greatest 251

### Chapter 251 - Against Viking Stavanger

Dusk approached and slowly began creeping over the bustling city of Trondheim. The setting sun seemed to have ignited the sparse clouds, painting Lerkendal Stadium in a multitude of crisscrossing dreamy colors.

It was still 3:56 PM, with more than two hours left to the scheduled start of Rosenborg's game against Viking Stavanger. However, an immense crowd had already flooded Lerkendal, filling up the seats within the stands of the home ground of Rosenborg Ballklub. The home section of the stadium was already like a sea of people in black and white colors, singing and cheering at the top of their voices like there was no tomorrow.

Kristin Stein swept her gaze over the passionate supporters around her — and then over the Rosenborg players warming up on the pitch until her eyes rested on Zachary. She couldn't help but smile as her mood lightened. 'Thank God he managed to recover before the end of the season without any issues,' she mused.

Rosenborg's chances of winning the trophy that night had increased considerably due to Zachary's return. There was little to no chance that the Troll Kids would lose the upcoming game with the phenomenal number-33 back on the starting line-up.

"It has been a while since I last watched a live Rosenborg game," Emily Anderson, Zachary's agent, said from beside her. She, too, was in Rosenborg's colors, looking pretty in a long-sleeved white top, a black and white scarf, and a chic Rosenborg cap. "I see quite a number of new faces," she continued without a pause, casting her gaze onto the pitch — towards Zachary's position. "Who are the two black players standing with Zachary?"

A soft smile lit up Kristin's face on hearing her question. She'd grown close to Emily over the previous few months of working as Zachary's publicity secretary. She respected her as a football agent and enjoyed her company as an acquaintance.

"One is Thomas Partey, a very talented defensive midfielder," Kristin replied. "The other is Eric Bailly, an incredible defender. The two of them have managed to capture the hearts of the Rosenborg supporters within just two months of making their debut. They are truly phenomenal players, the likes that will go ways later in their respective careers."

"Oh," Emily said, raising a brow. "How talented are they? Are they on a level similar to that of Zachary?"

"Nah," Kristin replied, shaking her head. "Zachary is in his own world regarding skills and talent. However, you shouldn't belittle the two of them. Thomas Partey is just 20 years of age. However, he has already made it into the top defensive midfielders in the Norwegian League this season. The other player, Eric Bailly, seems to be even more talented. He's just 19 years, but he has already put up several great performances and successfully defended against a few top forwards in the Norwegian League. He is like an impenetrable bastion on the defense."

"It seems Coach Johansen is pretty good at spotting talented young players," Emily remarked, seemingly deep in thought.

"He sure is," Kristin chipped in, sighing. "Aside from those two, he also managed to sign two more talented young defenders during the mid-season transfer window. They have also been doing great over the previous two months."

"He managed to sign four talented young players in a single go!" Emily exclaimed, her eyes widening. "He's quite something, then. Rosenborg will surely go ways with him as a coach. And maybe, I should try getting some scouting advice from him."

Kristin nodded in agreement. Like the rest of the Rosenborg fans, she'd also been shocked by Coach Johansen's insight. He'd gone against most of the Rosenborg executives to sign four unknown players. Yet, in only two months, those insignificant players had performed beyond expectations and captured the hearts of most of the Rosenborg fans. It was a marvelous feat in the highly commercialized modern football landscape.

Coach Johansen's shrewdness when scouting players was remarkable. Kristin truly admired his vision, especially since she, too, was aspiring to become a professional scout in the future.

"Let me take this opportunity to welcome everyone to Lerkendal Stadion," Kristin heard Kjell Roar, the commentator for the day, yell out loud a short while later. His voice was loud and clear through the stadium's loudspeakers. "Welcome, everyone. I hope you're all having a great evening and ready for some football action! It's match-day twenty-nine. The Troll Kids are about to go up against Viking Stavanger in the second last game of this year's Tippeligaen season."

"I'm looking forward to the start of the match since today might be the climax of Rosenborg's season," the commentator continued without a pause. "The Troll Kids only need a draw to become the Norwegian Champions in today's fixture. They are at 65 points, five ahead of second-placed Strømsgodset. With one more point, they'll win the league with a game to go before the end of the season. And the good news is that Zachary Bemba, the talented young number-33, is back on the starting line-up after taking off two months to recover from a thigh injury."

"Harald! What is your take on this match? Do you think the Troll Kids can pick up the needed point and become the 2013 Norwegian champions today night?"

"Well," Harald Brattbakk, the pundit for the day, began. "The Troll Kids should be more motivated than ever to win this game. They will surely want to end the season early. Let's not forget that they still have to play three more games in the Europa League and then face off against Molde in the Norwegian Cup final before the end of the year. So, I'm sure they'll do their utmost to win against Viking in today's game. Moreover, I can't just picture any chance of Rosenborg losing with Zachary back on the starting line-up. That's almost an impossibility."

"So, your prediction is a win for Rosenborg, then?" Kjell Roar queried.

"Yes," Harald replied in a confident tone. "My prediction is 2:1 in favor of Rosenborg."

"Hehe," Kjell Roar chuckled, seemingly amused. "Pray that you're right. Otherwise, hmm."

"I should be right this time," Harald said with a solemn tone. "The score might not be the correct one. But this is a match that Rosenborg will win for sure."

"Let's talk about Zachary, then," Kjell Roar intoned after a short break. "We all know that the young prodigy has been out of action for an entire two months with a thigh injury. Today is the night of his comeback. He is back on the starting line-up and will surely be looking to score and force his way to the top of the list of the Golden Boot contenders again. He has already managed to net 18 goals during this Tippeligaen season. Should he score one more, he'll tie with Frode Johnsen, the current top scorer. Harald! Do you see this happening? Can Zachary Bemba regain his form and score his 19th goal in the Tippeligaen this season?"

"That is a question I can't answer," Harald Brattbakk, the pundit, said with an audible sigh. "Zachary has missed out on a lot of action over the past two months. So, I'm guessing he'll most likely not be at his best in today's game. But I might be wrong."

"Oh, why?" Kjell Roar chipped in.

"The reason is simple," Harald, the pundit, replied. "I have learned never to judge players like Zachary with simple common sense after a number of experiences. Zachary is a brilliant player who can easily create miracles on the pitch. Maybe, he might return with a bang in today's match and end up scoring a brace to help Rosenborg clinch the title. But we can't know for sure until we see him perform in the opening minutes of this game."

"I have to disagree with you on that point," Kjell Roar chimed in once again. "I, for one, believe that Zachary isn't ready to return to the starting line-up. He should be rusty since he has been away for two months. If I were Coach Johansen, I would have placed Zachary among the substitutes today. I would only give him a few minutes of playing time — to ensure that he takes the necessary baby steps to regain his match fitness and form. That would be the right way of doing things to ensure that our young prodigy regains his confidence at a slow but steady rate without taking any unnecessary risks."

"But I just don't know what is up with our friend, Coach Johansen," the commentator continued. "Why the rush? Why is he in a hurry to play Zachary even when he has just recovered from an injury? Zachary's return to the starting eleven is a bit too hurried for sure. So, I'm guessing he'll underperform in today's fixture."

"You might be right with your analysis," Harald said after a short pause. "But as I already mentioned, you can't judge Zachary by normal standards. He is the sort of player who's an outlier. He's a hardworking and brilliant athlete that can perform beyond expectations even when the odds are stacked against him. The coach must have his reasons for placing him on the starting line-up. So, we can only wait and see how he performs after kick-off."

"Then, let's wait and see."

Kjell Jonevret, the head coach of Viking Stavanger, swept his gaze across all the players in the visitor's dressing room before nodding to himself in satisfaction. They were all waiting eagerly for his pre-match address. He could tell that they were highly motivated and ready to face off against the tricky Rosenborg side.

"In a few minutes, we'll clash against Rosenborg," he began with a smile. "I won't bother to go through most of the tactics once again. I've been talking about the game plan on replay over the past few days. By now, all of you should be very familiar with the tactics. So, I'll only touch upon a few crucial points before sending you to the pitch for the game."

"First," he continued, stroking his chin. "You've got to play this game as if your lives depend on it. We can't just allow Rosenborg to trample all over us so that they can become champions. We have to put up a fight and give them a game of their lives. So, I want all of you to display two hundred percent in today's match. Play as a team, and we'll surely succeed and defeat Rosenborg here at Lerkendal."

"Second, I want our two holding midfielders to give some tough love to that Zachary Bemba. Please, make sure that you don't allow him any space within our final third. Be aggressive and close him down quickly whenever he receives the ball. Mark him tightly, and we'll be able to nip all Rosenborg's attacks in the bud. Moreover, there isn't much that he can do since he has just returned from an injury. Thus it should be quite easy for you two to mark him. Are we together, Christian and André?"

"Yes, coach," the two defensive midfielders replied.

The coach nodded before sweeping his gaze around the dressing room again. "Third," he said. "Try your best to limit their crosses into our box. You have to stay calm and make first-time clearances whenever there is an attack on our goal. Additionally, our center-backs must mark Nicki Nielsen, the Rosenborg center-forward, tightly since he'll be the key man in this game. If we freeze him, we'll limit Rosenborg's chances to score to the bare minimum. That way, we'll create time for ourselves to settle into the game and then launch our counters against Rosenborg. That's all. Are we together, guys?"

"Yes, coach."

Coach Kjell Jonevret nodded. "Then, let's go out there and give Rosenborg a game they'll never forget. Let's play to our heart's content and frustrate them to the best of our abilities. And above all, let's enjoy the game." He smiled, clapping his hands to motivate his players further.

## Chapter 252 - A Deadlock

The referee blew the whistle at exactly 6:00 PM to the digit that evening. On the center spot, Nicki Nielsen, the Rosenborg number-9, didn't dilly-dally in the slightest. He immediately flicked the ball to Zachary before sprinting off towards Viking Stavanger's half like a whirlwind.

The much-anticipated second last game of that Tippeligaen season was finally underway. The Rosenborg fans started cheering and singing Rosenborg's victory chants at the top of their voices. It was as if they were sure they would win the league that very day.

Zachary felt his heart starting to race with excitement as he received Nicki Nielsen's pass in the center circle. He couldn't help but immerse himself in the passionate cheers of the home fans as he brought the ball under control.

The feeling of playing in front of the home crowd once again was truly fulfilling and pleasant beyond measure.

It had been slightly more than two months since he'd last played professional competitive football. After toiling day in and day out through recovery, he was finally back on the starting line-up — in a game that could sum up Rosenborg's entire Tippeligaen season.

The Troll Kids had a chance to win the league that very evening. Either a draw or a win against Viking Stavanger would cement their position as the 2013 Norwegian champions.

Zachary yearned to do his best and put up an incredible display to mark his return to the starting line-up. However, he also understood that he had to remain patient, especially when with the ball. He had to let himself grow slowly but steadily into the game before trying out any daring plays against the opponents.

His motto for that game was limited face-offs against the opponents to maximize efficiency while lowering the risk of reinjury to the bare minimum. That was his plan to regain his confidence and put the injury behind him without taking any unnecessary risks.

Thus, after receiving the ball from Nicki, he immediately relinquished it to Thomas Partey in the defensive midfield before running into space to await a return pass.

Thomas Partey didn't even take a few moments to bring Zachary's grounded pass under control. He flicked it to Mike Jensen, the other defensive midfielder in Rosenborg's 4-2-3-1 formation, without a moment of delay. Mike Jensen did the same and relinquished the ball to Mikael Dorsin before the opponents could close him down.

Rosenborg was already off to a commanding start.

For the first six minutes of the game, the Rosenborg players managed to dictate possession by exchanging short but precise passes within the backfield. They utilized their superiority on paper and grass to deny the Viking Stavanger players any chance of touching the ball in those few minutes.

Be that as it may, the Viking Stavanger players remained defensive and didn't use any high pressing tactics to win possession from Rosenborg. The visitors just sat back and defended in front of their final third, leaving only two players upfront to do all the pressing. They were playing a 4-4-2 defensive formation, with eight men always behind the ball at every moment of the game.

Zachary couldn't help but sigh inwardly after grasping Viking Stavanger's game plan. The Viking Coach had utilized the pure 4-4-2 defensive formation to neutralize Rosenborg's fast-flowing counterattacking football. It was a simple yet effective strategy that managed to freeze the entire attacking force of Rosenborg.

However, Zachary wasn't the least bit discouraged by Viking Stavanger's tenacity. He remained true to his game and utilized his high game intelligence, coupled with the Zinedine-Pirlo-Mental-Juju, to play simple one-touch or two-touch football.

Even as the clock approached the 30th minute of the game, he didn't push himself into making any unnecessary risky plays. He remained patient as a hunter watching his prey while exchanging passes with his teammates like a true Maestro.

His football was simple and nothing spectacular. As a result, he blended into the rest of the Rosenborg players — without any marked visible impact on the playing field. Even the opponents soon started ignoring him since his performance seemed to be just barely average.

Olav Brusveen, the TV2 Sporten correspondent, was seated in the area designated for the press — just beside the tunnel exit, watching the match intently. He was one of the many people in Lerkendal at that moment that had wished for Zachary to put up a phenomenal display to mark his return after his recovery.

However, after watching the first forty-five minutes of the game, Olav couldn't help but sigh and shake his head with unmasked disappointment.

'The injury really did a number on him,' the reporter thought, sighing and shaking his head for the umpteenth time that evening. 'There goes my headline for tomorrow. What a pity!'

The young-number-33 hadn't managed to have any marked impact on the pitch throughout the entire first half. Aside from relinquishing and receiving passes in the middle of the field, he hadn't accomplished any other feat that was newsworthy.

Zachary was too casual on the pitch and hadn't tried a single time to gain distance with the ball, even when Rosenborg was on the attack. He was clearly not the Zachary of two months ago. He was no longer the player that could always keep the opponents on tenterhooks just by being on the playing field.

"I already mentioned this before the game," Olav heard Kjell Roar, the commentator for the day, intone. "It was simply a mistake for Coach Johansen to place a player as young and inexperienced as Zachary on Rosenborg's starting eleven immediately after his recovery."

"Just by looking at the way he's playing, you can easily tell that he lacks the confidence to take on any opposing players," the commentator continued without a pause. His mellifluous voice was loud and clear over the wild cheering in Lerkendal through the stadium's loudspeakers. "That should be a result of some psychological trauma brought about by the injury."

"Zachary has only put up a below-par performance throughout the first half, without creativity in the final third. Look at him passing the ball around—in the middle of the field. His passing lacks any intent. It lacks that phenomenal brilliance of the Zachary from two months ago. That's why I still insist that the coach should have started Zachary on the bench in today's game."



"I have to disagree with you on that point, Kjell," Harald Brattbakk, the pundit, chimed in. "Zachary's performance has been okay during the first half. He's always solid whenever he's on the ball and hasn't made any mistakes so far. And let's not mention his passing and work rate since those aspects of his game have been truly incredible from the very first minute. For me, the Zachary in this game has played as a true central midfielder. Rosenborg is dominating possession by seventy percent as we head into the halftime break because of his solid command of the midfield."

"Thus, I'm in full support of Coach Johansen's decision to play Zachary in today's game," the pundit continued. "With such a solid performance during the first half, he truly deserves to be on Rosenborg's starting line-up."

"However, I also have to admit that Zachary lacks that touch of brilliance he possessed two months ago. He lacks the boldness of taking chances and unleashing defense-splitting passes that we've come to love about him. But what do you people expect? He has just recovered from an injury, for God's sake. And off course, his form has taken a slight dip due to the injury."

"So, let's give this young man a break to recover and regain his confidence," Harald continued with a somber tone. "I'm confident that he will regain peak form very soon if he continues playing competitive football. And that's another reason why I support Coach Johansen playing Zachary in today's game. I am delighted by the coach's decision to let him go out there — onto the playing field to rediscover his football. In my book, that's the best way to help Zachary regain his form at this moment."

"I understand where you're coming from," Kjell Roar said with an audible sigh. "And I can relate to Coach Johansen's decision to play Zachary in today's match. However, let's hope that that decision won't cost Rosenborg the chance to win the league today. For now, let's take you back to the live-action where Rosenborg is still dominating possession in the added minutes of the first half. However, the score remains deadlocked at 0:0, and it seems it'll stay that way until half time."

"The good news is that Rosenborg will win the league if the score remains 0:0," Harald reminded with a chuckle.

"But that would be anticlimactic," Kjell Roar said. "Wouldn't it?"

"As long as we're champions, the rest doesn't matter. It's only the results that matter, not how you achieve the results."

"If you say so."

Coach Johansen didn't panic in the slightest when his players ended the first half without scoring even a single goal. He'd already braced himself for a tough battle against Viking Stavanger. The 0:0 first-half draw hadn't touched his bottom line in the slightest. He was very relaxed and carefree as he headed towards the dressing room to address his players during the halftime break.

On entering the dressing room, he immediately swept his gaze slowly but steadily across all the players. He could see that they were all doing their best to recover from the first-half exhaustion by gulping down some water and munching on energy bars. From the glint in most of their eyes and the solemn atmosphere in the dressing room, Coach Johansen could tell that they were in a good state of mind. It seemed that the failure to score in the first half hadn't affected their confidence in any way. They appeared more than ready to return to the playing field — to do their best in the second half. At that moment, they possessed the mindset of champions and still believed that they could win no matter what.

"Zachary," Coach Johansen said after taking in the situation of the dressing room.

"Yes, coach," Zachary replied almost immediately, placing down his water bottle.

"In the second half, I would like you to move further upfront so that you can offer better support to Nicki when we're on the attack," Coach Johansen said with a smile. "I prefer that you become bolder in your playing style. Try creating some opportunities in the final third and testing their keeper with longshots whenever you get a chance. I'm sure that you can do it if you try. I have confidence in you. Are we together, Zachary?"

"Yes, coach," Zachary replied solemnly. "I understand."

"Good," Coach Johansen said, nodding and looking around. He truly wished for Zachary to return to the top of his game as quickly as possible. That way, he could utilize the boy prodigy in the Europa League match against Red Bull Salzburg the following Thursday.

"Okay, guys," Coach Johansen said a minute later, taking his place in front of the tactics board. "Let's use the remaining few minutes of the break to refine some of our tactics so that we can fare better in the second half. We need to win this game and become champions today. Are you guys with me?"

"Yes, coach," the players yelled, more or less in unison. "We're with you."

"That's the spirit of Rosenborg," the coach said, nodding. Without any more dilly-dallying, he started giving his halftime pep talk with the intent to bolster the players' confidence and energy levels.

As words flew out of his mouth at the pace of a machine gun, he emphasized a few crucial points of the game plan and then assigned new roles to a few players in a matter of minutes. He concluded his address with a loud Rosenborg cheer before sending the players back to the playing field for the second half.

He'd already done his best to prepare the players for the game. The rest was up to them. Whether they could win the league that day solely depended on their efforts.

## Chapter 253 - A Bolt From The Blue

\*FWEEEEEEEE\*

The referee blew the whistle, and the match restarted after the break with Viking Stavanger's kick-off.

The Lerkendal crowd exploded into thunderous cheers, drowning out every sound in the stadium. The atmosphere was festive in the home ground of the Troll Kids as the fans sang at the top of their voices to egg on their respective teams.

From the first minute of the second half, the Viking players tried to dominate possession by playing slow but steady passing football in the backfield. They looked much more comfortable than they had in the first half as they moved the ball from one side of the pitch to another without trying to mount an attack on Rosenborg. It seemed they intended to grow slowly into the game without taking risks.

However, the Rosenborg players didn't allow the opponents to do as they wished in the backfield. The men in white and black flooded Viking's side of the pitch like locusts applying tremendous pressure on their opponents.

They forced the Viking players to constantly play the ball long towards Rosenborg's half by utilizing high pressing tactics. As a result, Viking Stavanger quickly lost their momentum and stopped dominating possession. After that, the visitors found it hard to contain the predatory Troll Kids – who started dictating the tempo once more.

Rosenborg's two wingers were on fire in the early stages of the second half. Both Tobias Mikkelsen and Alexander S?derlund constantly made runs along the touchline that ended with teasing crosses floating into the Viking Stavanger box. Their wing play was impeccable and caused a lot of confusion within the Viking Stavanger defense.

With crosses constantly flying into the box like guided ballistic missiles, Rosenborg managed to whittle down Viking's tenacity by the 55th minute.

Spaces started appearing within the final third, and Nicki Nielsen, the Rosenborg number-9, started causing plenty of problems for the Viking defense and creating several half-chances. He was simply a beast on the striking line. He even came close to scoring in the 56th and 60th minutes of the game. However, the Viking keeper was alert on both occasions and managed to make incredible saves to keep the score level.

Zachary had heeded coach Johansen's advice and pushed further forward to support Nicki Nielsen upfront from the very first minute of the second half. He wasn't exactly at the forefront — but playing behind Nicki Nielson as a half striker to complete Rosenborg's 4-4-1-1 formation. He still had to manage his attacking midfield responsibilities while constantly making runs into Viking's box to bolster Rosenborg's attacks.

It was a tiring position to play in, especially during a highly competitive game. However, Zachary loved it since he could utilize his high-end stamina and endurance attributes, graded S- by the system. He was hyperactive throughout the early minutes of the second half, running at the defenders like there was no tomorrow. He didn't perform any spectacular deeds — but utilized his remarkable sense of positioning to pressurize the defenders whenever he got an opportunity.

Rosenborg looked more and more dangerous on the attack with him on the striking line. However, he didn't manage to make even a single shot at goal even as the game approached the 70th minute. He was

clearly still having problems adapting to the pace of the competitive games in the Tippeligaen after his injury.

Thomas Partey, Rosenborg's defensive midfielder, jumped high and intercepted another Viking long ball close to the border of the defensive third in the 75th minute. Without losing a moment, he flicked it back towards the backline with his head, delivering it to Tore Reginiussen, the center-back. The Ghanaian then stepped away from one of Viking's forwards before running into space.

"Pass here, hurry!" He shouted with a sense of urgency in broken Norwegian after taking a glance around the playing field.

Thomas Partey wanted to prevent his teammates from wasting time passing the ball around in the backfield. His only goal at that moment was to initiate another Rosenborg attack right away without wasting a second. That way, he would help his teammates sustain the pressure on the opponents, thereby strengthening Rosenborg's chances of scoring and breaking the deadlock.

Tore Reginiussen, the center-back, didn't disappoint after receiving the ball. He immediately kicked it back to Thomas Partey before the opposing center-forward could close him down.

Thomas Partey cast a fleeting glance towards the other side of the pitch as he controlled the pass from Tore. In a flash, his eyes took in the positioning of most of his teammates. All the while, his mind was processing the best outlet for the ball at that moment.

After spending more than two months at Rosenborg, he'd gotten used to the habits, weaknesses, and strengths of all his teammates. So, he was aware that most of them had a low probability of making much of an impact at that crucial moment since they weren't first-rate players. However, there was one player who was a unique entity — an enigmatic wonder on the team. That player had been a monster before he'd suffered an injury two months prior.

Thomas had watched that player perform feats akin to miracles on the playing field some two months ago. That was why he'd decided to join Rosenborg at the time. Thomas immediately elected that that player was the perfect outlet for the ball at that moment.

Without wasting much time, Thomas Partey raised his leg high and unleashed a long-range pass towards the other side of the pitch where Zachary was lurking.

Zachary reacted immediately on noticing the ball approaching his position. He immediately ditched the Viking defender marking him — and set off after the ball like a wolf on the hunt. His near-instantaneous reaction helped him get to the ball just at the border of the final third before any other player.

By reflex, he stretched out his boot ever-so-slightly to bring the descending ball under control before it could bounce on the green. His ball-control was flawless, giving the impression that his boot was a ball magnet. He could have even given Lionel Messi a run for his money with the way he controlled the ball at the moment.

"Zachary, \*clap\*clap, Zachary, \*clap\*clap..."

The Rosenborg fans started singing his name after he expertly controlled the ball, boosting his confidence. Without losing even a second, he turned around with the ball hooked to his foot, skipping past an approaching Viking defender with a deft second touch. His movements were seamless, like a fish navigating the waters of a clear lake as he accelerated towards Viking Stavanger's box.

At that moment, he felt totally comfortable with the ball since he'd managed to create a few yards of space with his initial prompt turn. He even forgot his fear of suffering another injury as his mind took in the wild cheering of the Rosenborg fans. There was nothing else on his mind — except hunting for a goal for Rosenborg. He was like a tiger back in the mountains after spending months in captivity. He longed to unleash carnage on the opponents.

Zachary expertly kept the ball close to his feet while racing towards Viking Stavanger's box like a whirlwind. A moment later, after skipping past another opposing defender, he took the briefest of glances right ahead, trying to find a teammate. That was because he understood that it would almost be impossible to penetrate the opposing defense without the support of a teammate.

However, before he could find an outlet for the ball, he noticed the keeper off his line at that crucial moment of the game. It was like the Viking number-1 was inviting him to take his chances at goal from outside the 18-yard box.

Zachary had no intention of missing out on exploiting such laxity by the Viking goalkeeper. Without losing a moment, he slowed slightly and drew his leg back like a bowstring in preparation to fire towards the goal.

"Close him down, guys! Block him!" He distantly registered someone, probably the Viking coach, yelling in the background. However, that didn't make him rethink his intentions.

He swung his leg down like a whip, smacking the ball towards one side, with proficiency perfected from practicing in the G.O.A.T Skills Simulator over the previous two months.

"BANG!"

A soft smile outlined his face as he felt his left boot make the sweetest of connections with the ball, sending it on a curling trajectory towards the goal. It was like an arrow let loose from a bow, reaching incredible velocity within a mere instant. It floated over the defenders in the box before dipping slightly and curling into the top left corner.

Rune Jarstein, the Viking keeper, had tried his best to track back and save the ball. However, his efforts were fruitless due to the incredible swiftness of the ball.

1:0.

In the 76th minute, the deadlock had finally been broken. Rosenborg had scored first in the tightly contested match against Viking. Zachary could hardly contain his joy. He sprinted towards the corner flag with a finger placed on his lips to celebrate.

"That came out of nowhere," Kristin heard Kjell Roar, the commentator, say with a sigh after the thunderous cheers started dying down. "With a bolt from the blue, Zachary has managed to catch the keeper sleeping and score Rosenborg's first goal. I have to admit I didn't expect that. That was some incredible stuff from the young number-33. That reminds me of the Zachary from two months ago. Harald! What's your take?"

"The goal was more than incredible," Harald Brattbakk, the pundit, replied. "Just when everyone was starting to believe that the game would end 0:0, Zachary goes ahead and unleashes a missile to score from thirty yards away. He's as sharp as ever when it matters, and his celebration says it all. With that incredible goal, he has managed to shut down all those, like a certain someone, speculating that he has lost his form after his injury. What a player!" Harald chuckled.

"Well," Kjell Roar said with an audible sigh. "I have nothing to say to that. Zachary has managed to net his 19th goal this Tippeligaen season. He's now tied with Frode Johnsen as the top scorer for this season. Indeed, what a player!"

"Let's not forget that Rosenborg has now moved to 68 points," Harald said, sounding excited. "If the Viking players can't come up with a way to penetrate Rosenborg's defense and score two goals, the Troll Kids will be crowned as champions tonight. That will bolster Zachary's chances of being crowned as the best player of the season."

"Well," Kjell Roar cut in. "If it were up to me, I would simply give him the season MVP accolade without going through the voting process. Time and time again, he has managed to prove that he's a class of his own throughout this season. He can still score even when he isn't at his best, like during today's game. He surely deserves the accolade. Let's hope that the award committee is listening." He chuckled.

"Weren't you the one criticizing Coach Johansen's decision to include Zachary in the line-up?" Harald queried with a bit of humor.

"That was then, and this is now," Kjell Roar said in a solemn voice. "I've already admitted that the boy is probably the best player in Norway this season. So, can you let me off?"

"Hehe," Harald chuckled. "Then, let's get back to the live-action. We still have thirteen minutes plus added time to the end of the game. Can the Troll Kids hold on to their lead and win the league today? We'll have the answer very soon."

## Chapter 254 - One-Two

The game restarted soon after the goal celebrations.



Coach Johansen stood on the sidelines, watching his players array themselves in a defensive 4-5-1 formation to defend against the more frequent Viking Stavanger attacks. The visitors seemed more proactive in their playing style after conceding the goal.

However, that didn't dampen Coach Johansen's mood in the slightest. He could hardly contain his joy since he was less than a quarter of an hour away from winning the 2013 Tippeligaen.

Rosenborg would win the league trophy that evening as long as his players defended well and prevented Viking from scoring two goals in the final few minutes of gameplay. Coach Johansen could even already picture himself lifting the trophy a few minutes from then. That elevated his spirits, making him feel like he was high on century-old wine.

"Maybe, we should think of introducing a few substitutes to bolster our defense and prevent the opponents from scoring," Trond Henriksen, the assistant head coach, suggested from beside him. "That'll also enable some of our key players to gain some much-needed rest before our Thursday's Europa League away game against Red Bull Salzburg."

"That's okay," Coach Johansen replied in a carefree manner. "You can go ahead and tell Ole Selnes and John Chibuike to start warming up. I need them on the pitch in less than eight minutes."

"Okay," Trond Henriksen replied with a smile. "But, who are you thinking of replacing?"

"Zachary and Nicki Nielsen for the moment," Coach Johansen responded, his eyes still following the proceedings on the field of play. "They should be tired already since they have been working hard as a pair of oxen throughout the entire game. So, I need to give them some time to rest. However, I'm not planning on making the third substitution yet as insurance against possible injuries in the final minutes of the game."

"Okay, then," Trond replied. "That's a good idea. I'll start prepping the substitutes right away." He then stepped away and headed towards the substitute's bench.

Coach Johansen returned his full attention to the action on the playing field immediately after. He started stroking his red beard, deep in thought as he watched the Viking Stavanger players mount yet another hair-raising attack on Rosenborg's backline.

The visitors had totally changed their entire game plan after conceding the goal. They were no longer playing defensively. Instead, they mounted a series of attacks using wing-play and long ball strategies to penetrate Rosenborg's defense. They even changed to a 4-2-3-1 formation, seemingly with the intent of dominating the midfield and dictating the tempo. They were clearly keen on scoring and bringing proceedings back to equal terms as soon as possible.

At that moment, Trond Olsen, the Viking Stavanger left-forward, was dribbling along the touchline, moving towards Rosenborg's box like a bullet train on the rails. His speed was otherworldly. With a lot of ease, he skipped past a sliding tackle from Tobias Mikkelsen, the Rosenborg right-winger, before continuing his mad dash on the left flank.

However, a few seconds later, Trond Olsen ran into an impenetrable bastion in the form of Eric Bailly, the Rosenborg right-back. The Ivorian defender cornered him at the borderline of the defensive third, leaving him without a chance to cut into the pitch or cross the ball. Eric applied tremendous pressure on the right-winger and won the ball, fair and square, with a brilliant sliding tackle that elicited a wave of booming cheering from the home fans. With that incredible display from the Ivorian, Rosenborg managed to regain possession once again.

Eric Bailly didn't dilly-dally in the slightest. He picked himself from the ground and kicked the ball towards Mike Jensen, the Rosenborg defensive midfielder. Mike Jensen received it beautifully and flicked it on to Thomas Partey, the other defensive midfielder.

Thomas Partey immediately unleashed a lofted pass towards the right-wing, where Tobias Mikkelsen was lurking. With that, the Ghanaian managed to initiate another Rosenborg attack. The Troll Kids flew forward like a pack of wolves on the hunt.

Tobias Mikkelsen, the Rosenborg right-winger, received the ball mid-sprint close to the touchline. He continued towards Viking Stavanger's half like a whirlwind, leaving both teammates and opponents in the dust. He was like Usain Bolt on the race track, dribbling and skipping past a couple of challenges like mad. The fans even began singing his name due to his incredible display.

Jørgen Skjelvik, the Viking Stavanger left-back, soon closed him down and interrupted his mad dash soon after. Tobias, though, didn't try to engage the troublesome left-back. Instead, the Rosenborg right-winger played it safe and unleashed a lofted cut-back pass into the middle of the pitch where Zachary was lurking.

With that brilliant and quick switch in play, the Viking Stavanger defensive players were caught unawares once more.

Zachary received the ball mid-sprint close to the center circle. Without halting his run, he chested the ball down onto the green before circumventing an approaching Viking Stavanger midfielder with a deft second touch. From there, he didn't look back — but continued towards the Viking box, bolting through the middle like there was no tomorrow.

Coach Johansen could feel his heartbeat starting to race with anticipation as he watched Zachary exchange a couple of one-twos with Nicki Nielsen. Their teamwork of 'giving' and 'going' was impeccable. They steadily made their way through the crowd of opposing defenders. They were as sharp as hawks, exploiting the smallest of gaps within the defensive third. They approached Viking Stavanger's box, like two apex predators on the hunt.

"Damn it! Close them down. Close the gaps, and don't let them approach our box..."

Kjell Jonevret, the Viking Stavanger head coach, roared out loud, like an enraged beast, from the visiting team's technical area. He was so loud to the point of causing some discomfort for Coach Johansen on the sidelines. It seemed the laxity of his players in the defense had angered him greatly.

However, his yelling didn't stop or slow down the Rosenborg attack in the slightest. In some magical way, Nicki Nielsen managed to circumvent Indridi Sigurdsson, the Viking Stavanger center-back, as he received a return pass from Zachary. He then slipped through a gap left by a center-back before stepping into a narrow pocket of space within the Viking Stavanger box. With that expert move, he'd managed to beat the entire defensive line and was one-on-one with the keeper.

Coach Johansen couldn't help but lean his towering physique forward — towards the touchline while clenching his fists at that moment. His head was pounding with nervous anticipation as he watched Nicki Nielsen lift his foot to unleash a shot at goal.

'Surely this is it,' Coach Johansen thought, his eyes never leaving the field of play. He was ninety percent confident his star striker would deliver again and convert to score Rosenborg's second goal. The coach was even already picturing the ball nestling perfectly into the back of the net.

However, something unexpected transpired the next instant. Johan Bjørndal, the other Viking Stavanger center-back, came sliding in to sweep the ball away, sending Nicki Nielsen tumbling to the ground.

"What the f\*\*K!?" Coach Johansen mumbled as he took a second to process what had just transpired on the field of play — within Viking Stavanger's box. For a moment, he found it hard to believe that an opposing defender had made a last-man challenge and fouled Nicki Nielsen within the box. Surely, the center-back had just gifted Rosenborg a golden chance to win the game with ten minutes of 'normal' playing time remaining to the end of the game. That was a little bit moronic in Coach Johansen's view.

\*FWEEEEEEEE\*

As expected, the referee blew the whistle soon after and awarded Rosenborg a penalty kick in the 80th minute of the game. However, he didn't just stop at that — but also showed a straight red card to Johan Bjørndal, the center-back who had made the last-man tackle on Nicki Nielsen.

Coach Johansen could feel his tension melting away as he continued following the proceedings in Viking Stavanger's box. With the red card, Viking was down to ten men. At that moment, the coach was almost a hundred percent certain he would win the game.

"You should take the penalty," Nicki Nielsen said to Zachary after picking himself from the ground in Viking Stavanger's box. He seemed okay, without any signs of an injury, after getting some help from the Rosenborg medics.

"Are you sure about this?" Zachary queried, raising a brow and glancing squarely at Nicki with unmasked skepticism. It was customary on the Rosenborg team for the attacking player who'd created the penalty to take it. Thus, he was surprised when Nicki Nielsen, a striker who was always hungry for goals, offered him such a precious opportunity to take the spot-kick.

"Don't look at me like that," Nicki said with a dismissive wave of his hand. He then picked up the ball from the referee and handed it to Zachary. "I don't want a player from another team to win the golden boot. So, you should take the penalty and make sure you become the top scorer."

"Thanks," Zachary said, receiving the ball from Nicki's outstretched arms.

Without waiting for any response from Nicki, he moved towards the penalty spot to ready himself to take the penalty kick. Hope had already bloomed inside him since he was close to cementing his position as that season's top scorer with his 20th goal of the league. He was on the cusp of completing one of the most rewarding milestones in the system's Tippeligaen serial challenge mission.

Kristin was already standing on the tip of her toes as she waited anxiously for Zachary to take the penalty. Seconds felt like hours as she watched the towering number-33 take a few steps back from the ball while facing the Viking goalkeeper. All the fans around her were silent. She could easily make out all the commentator's words, loud and clear, through the stadium's loudspeakers.

"It's Zachary against Rune Jarstein, the Viking Stavanger goalkeeper, at this crucial moment of the game," she heard Kjell Roar, the commentator, intone. "Can he score and extend Rosenborg's lead in this crucial game that is the climax of Rosenborg's season?"

Kristin craned her neck slightly as she watched Zachary make an angled run towards the penalty spot. Without any suspense, he managed to send the keeper diving the wrong way and fired into the back of the net to score Rosenborg's second goal.

"GOAAAALL...."

A wave of thunderous cheering exploded throughout the entire stadium, drowning out the commentator's voice the very next instant. The fans around Kristin jumped up and down and hugged each other like the best of friends as they sang Rosenborg's victory chants at the top of their voices. The entire Lerkendal was on fire, vibrating intermittently, as Zachary dashed towards the corner flag to celebrate the second goal.

Kristin, on her part, could feel her eyes moistening. She didn't jump around like the rest of the Rosenborg supporters to celebrate the goal — but settled back on her seat, letting the contentment spread within her with every passing moment. She felt dizzy with excitement since her team was about to win the league that evening. Her only regret was that her grandpa wasn't with her to share that incredible moment. It was really a pity.

"Are you okay, Kristin?" Emily Anderson asked from beside her. "Why aren't you celebrating with us?" The agent was also jumping and waving her scarf around in the air to celebrate Zachary's goal. She was in high spirits.

"This is my way of celebrating this time around," Kristin replied, letting out a breath and leaning back into her seat. "I'm scared that I might go crazy with excitement if I dare do anything else." She added with a bit of humor.

Emily chuckled on hearing that. "I get what you mean," she said, her face blossoming into a smile. "I'm also slowly growing insane with excitement since we can now safely confirm that Rosenborg has won the league. By the way, did you hire anyone to record Zachary's performance in today's match?"

"Yes, I did," Kristin replied almost instantaneously. "I hired two cameramen before the commencement of the game. They should be somewhere in the lower stands recording the action as we speak now."

"That's awesome," Emily said, also settling down back in her seat. "Zachary's performance today will be good for his publicity. Thank you for the hard work."

"There's no need for you to say any thanks since that is my job. I'm always glad to do my job."

## Chapter 255 - First Silverware On The Professional Stage

Coach Johansen decided to play it safe and make three substitutions immediately after his players had finished celebrating the second goal. He switched out Zachary, Nicki Nielsen, and Mikael Dorsin — with the prime intention of giving them a little bit of extra rest before the following Thursday's Europa League game. He brought in the hardworking trio of Ole Selnes, John Chibuike, and Stefan Strandberg to snuff out any possibility of Viking Stavanger lucking out and making a comeback.

"Narrow down the spaces in the middle," he yelled at his players as soon as the game restarted. "I want you to remain compact and prevent them from penetrating our defense through the middle. We have less than ten minutes remaining. Stay focused and mark every opponent in our defensive third..."

Coach Johansen spat out words at the pace of a machine gun, trying to organize his team into the perfect defensive shape to weather Viking's barrage of attacks in the final minutes of the game.

Fortunately, his yelling motivated his players, prompting them to work harder than ever before. The minutes flew by quickly, with them exhibiting a high level of discipline in defense. The Viking Stavanger forwards weren't able to make any shots on goal.

However, the Rosenborg players didn't just stop at defending well. They mounted another tantalizing counterattack in the 89th minute after defending against a Viking Stavanger corner kick.

John Chibuike, the substitute center-forward, streamed forward through the middle like a whirlwind, leaving both teammates and opponents in his wake. He then passed the ball ahead into space on the right-wing — seemingly to no one in particular.

His perfect initiation of the counterattack had left the Viking players without any time to reorganize themselves into a proper defensive shape. He'd managed to set loose Tobias Mikkelsen, the right-winger, on a straight course towards the goal with that well-timed defense-splitting pass.

Tobias Mikkelsen didn't disappoint. He met the ball mid-sprint and continued racing towards the box like a bullet out of a sniper rifle's muzzle. In a matter of seconds, he shrugged off the single Viking defender that had been tracking his run and found the bottom left corner of the net with his weaker right foot.

The score then was 3:0, and the Troll Kids had taken yet another firm step towards winning the league in the 89th minute of gameplay.

Be that as it may, the Rosenborg players didn't relax in the slightest, even after the third goal. They continued playing defensively throughout added time and denied the visitors any shots on goal. They maintained their 3:0 lead until the referee blew the final whistle after four minutes of added time.

"Shalalalalalala... ohhh Rosenborg, Shalalalalalala... ohhh Rosenborg..."

Zachary remained seated on the bench for a minute or two, immersing himself in the passionate cheers of the fans after the final whistle. His team, Rosenborg, had just won the league with a match left to the end of the season. At long last, he'd won the first silverware in his professional career.

He felt much more alive than ever before. He could feel a quiet sense of contentment washing through him like a warm ocean wave, wiping away the stress of the entire season. He couldn't help but smile as he leaned back into his seat to savor the moment.

"Zachary," he heard Coach Johansen calling out to him a few seconds later. "Don't just sit there alone. Come and celebrate with us." A Cheshire cat's grin outlined the coach's face as he dragged Zachary from his seat and gave him a bear hug.

"You were incredible in today's game," he continued, "Your tremendous efforts have helped us become champions at an earlier date, with a match to go! Thanks for your hard work."

Zachary responded with a few polite words before stepping away from the coach and joining the rest of his already frenzied teammates. He felt like he was on cloud nine for the next few minutes while basking in the glory of winning the first silverware of his professional career.

A few minutes later, the entire Rosenborg team, including Zachary, started moving around the stadium to thank the fans who'd cheered them on throughout the season. The fans responded enthusiastically, giving the team a standing ovation while screaming Rosenborg's victory chants repeatedly.

Zachary enjoyed the moment, soaking himself into the excitement of winning the league. He gave away his jersey to a young passionate fan, seated close to the corner flag. At that moment, he was already drunk with resurgent joy, without any consideration to what Rosenborg's publicity and marketing departments would say.

Olav Brusveen, the TV2 Sporten reporter, was all smiles as he dragged Zachary away from the frenzied group of Rosenborg players for an on-pitch post-match interview. He wanted to get the first scoop on the boy prodigy's take on the just-concluded season.



"Zachary, congratulations upon winning the 2013 Tippeligaen," he said, holding out a microphone towards the young number-33.

"Thank you," Zachary replied, grinning.

"How do you feel about winning the league in your first season at Rosenborg?"

"Of course, I feel terrific. Words can't even describe the happiness I'm feeling at this moment."

"You were amazing throughout the season," Olav said. "Time and time again, you managed to help Rosenborg win and continue keeping their hopes of winning the league alive. Should we expect to see the same performance from you here at Lerkendal next season?"

"That's a given," Zachary replied almost instantaneously, seemingly not giving much thought to the question. "I'll continue doing my best to improve myself so that I can put up more brilliant performances next season. For me, I believe winning the league is just the beginning, but not the end."

"You'll be heading to Austria to face off against Red Bull Salzburg in the fourth game of the Europa League group stages next Thursday," Olav continued. "What are your thoughts about that upcoming match? Do you think you and your colleagues can put up another incredible performance and keep Rosenborg's hopes of qualifying for the next round alive?"

"Hehe," Zachary chuckled, scratching at his chin. "This isn't the right time to answer questions about the upcoming matches. Olav! Can't you give me some time to immerse myself in the feeling of winning the league before asking me about another competition?"

"Well," Olav said with a smile. "I believe that most of the Rosenborg fans would like an answer to that question. So, can you please give us your take on that match?"

"All I can say is that we're professional players," Zachary said in a solemn tone. "We'll always do our best to win every match that comes our way. That's the spirit of Rosenborg."

"I, for one, still believe we have a chance to qualify for the Europa League knock-out stages," he continued without a pause. "If we manage to win all remaining three games in the group stages, then we'll get to qualify for the next round. So, I still haven't given up. I still believe. For every minute I'm on the pitch during the remaining group matches, I'll fight my hardest, even for the slimmest of possibilities, so that my team can qualify. I'm sure my coaches and the rest of my teammates feel the same way. They, too, will do their best in the upcoming matches."

"Thank you, Zachary, for taking the time to answer my questions," Olav said, extending his hand for a handshake. "And congratulations for winning the league once again. I wish you the best in your upcoming matches."

"Thank you, Olav," Zachary replied, taking the hand.

Many of the reporters didn't just stop at speaking with Zachary. They flooded the stadium like locusts to interview all the Rosenborg players and the staff members that they could get ahold of at that moment. Even the people responsible for cleaning the stadium hallways managed to attract the attention of the press.

However, the reporters' manic behavior didn't last long. The festivities in Lerkendal stadium moved on to the next stage.

The members of the organizing committee began making preparations for the trophy presentation. They quickly set up a temporary podium, with a sparkling and glittering trophy sitting from across it. The long-awaited moment had finally come.

Without further ado, the chairman of Norsk Toppfotball, the governing body of Norwegian football, awarded the medals to Zachary and his teammates, sending Lerkendal into a frenzy of passionate cheers.

After that, the exciting moment truly arrived. Tore Reginiussen, the Rosenborg captain, received the 2013 league trophy from the Norsk Toppfotball chairman. The whole atmosphere in the stadium peaked when he lifted it up with both his hands the next instant.

The coach and players took turns holding the trophy before running with it across the green like madmen. What followed was a wild night of celebrations. The Rosenborg fans, staff, and players immersed themselves in the joy of becoming the 2013 champions after a year of hard work. It was a fantastic night for the footballing community of Trondheim.

#### Chapter 256 - Mission Milestones Within Sight

An alarm sounded, waking Zachary from a deep slumber. Eyes still closed, he extended his hand by reflex to turn off the bedside alarm clock. He'd slept late the previous night after partying with teammates to celebrate Rosenborg's first trophy of the season. He was still feeling dazed and hoped to stay in bed a bit longer.

Moreover, he had the day off and wasn't worried that he would be late for any training sessions with the team. Thus, he went back under the covers, intending to put in a few more hours of sleep after silencing the annoying alarm clock. However, just as he was beginning to sink into slumberland again, his phone started ringing, rousing him to full attention.

"Who could be calling at this time of the morning?" He mumbled under his breath, shifting and rolling around under the covers. He was feeling irritable after the annoying interruption of his sleep.

Nonetheless, he couldn't ignore the call. He knew there was a chance it could be something important. Thus, he begrudgingly extended his arm out of the covers and picked up the annoying phone from the bedside table.

"Hello," he said in a flat voice, placing the phone close to his ear. He didn't even bother to look at the screen.

"Hello dear," a familiar voice, full of charm and pleasing to the ear, sounded from the other end of the line. "Did I wake you up?"

"Not at all," Zachary replied, his grogginess melting away. "How are you? Are you enjoying your trip?"

"I'm doing well and trying my best to enjoy the trip," she responded. "Congrats upon winning your first trophy, by the way. I'm really happy for you."

"Thank you."

"I miss you so much, and I'm feeling down after missing your match yesterday."

"Ohhh! I miss you too," Zachary said, his tone softening. "But it's good you'll be back in a few days."

"That's the only thing that's keeping me going," she murmured softly, but her voice still carried to Zachary's ear. "Knowing that I'll be able to see you in a few days is my greatest motivation. I'm working hard to complete my assignment in the shortest time possible."

"That's sweet of you," Zachary said. "But please don't be rush so that you can avoid making unnecessary mistakes on the job. You don't have to worry. I'm not going anywhere. I'll be here when you return."

Camilla had left on a fortnight-long business trip to Canada a few days prior. She had missed Rosenberg's match against Viking Stavanger and the ensuing victory celebrations the previous night. So, Zachary told her about everything, including his two goals and the happenings at the post-match dinner party. The minutes flashed by quickly as they conversed, and their phone call unknowingly lasted longer than an hour.

Zachary was full of energy after the call. He stole a glance at his bedside clock and realized that it was already past ten. He didn't dawdle in bed much longer.

He got up, hastily washed up, and went outside for his routine morning jog. The morning sun had already risen above the horizon in the east. Its boundless multi-colored rays illuminated every nook and cranny of Trondheim.

Zachary relished the feeling of jogging in the mildly chilly air of late autumn. He raced across the streets of Trondheim like a free-spirited bird riding the winds. He didn't stop for anything until he made it back to his apartment forty minutes later.

By then, he was in high gear, the feeling of fatigue from the previous day long forgotten. Without wasting time, he dove into his yoga routine. For the several minutes that followed, he wholly immersed

himself in stretching his muscles to quicken his post-match recovery. He enjoyed exerting himself unworriedly after making a full recovery.

"DING"

The system notification chimed within his mind right after he'd completed his daily yoga routine.

"Congratulations to the user upon completing this month's progressive overload training mission," the system AI's apathetic voice sounded in his mind immediately after. "The system has awarded the user 300 Juju-points and a one-month dosage of a B-grade physical conditioning elixir. The user should check the system interface for more details."

"Another routine system mission completed!" Zachary exclaimed as he wiped away his sweat with a clean white towel. Without further ado, he summoned the system interface to check out the specifics.

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#4 new messages

CONGRATULATIONS

-> You have completed the mission: Progressive Overload Training to Regain Fitness after Injury

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->Mission-Rewards

1) B-grade physical conditioning elixir (Available in system-shop).

NB: The user must consume the elixir within 5 seconds of removal from the system shop.)

2) 200 Juju-points

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->Mission Summary

\*Task 1: Complete 60 seat-ups daily during the first week, 80 seat-ups daily during the second, 100 seat-ups daily during the third, and 120 seat-ups daily during the fourth week. Task goal: To improve the user's body control by strengthening and toning core-stabilizing abdominal muscles after an injury. (Task completed successfully. Task Rating: S-)

\*Task 2: Complete seven rounds of half a dozen Hatha-Yoga routines daily over four weeks. Task goal: To improve the user's body control by enhancing flexibility and strengthening core muscles after an injury. (Task completed successfully. Task Rating A+)

\*Task 3: Run 80 miles in an outdoor environment during the fourth week. Task goal: To help the user strengthen leg muscles after recovering from injury. (Miles completed: 90 miles. Task Rating: S-)

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Overall Mission Rating: S-

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->Bonus rewards

You have earned a bonus of 100 Juju-points

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A faint smile made its way onto Zachary's face, softening his intense features after he'd reviewed the mission completion notification. It was a rare occurrence for the system to offer him 300 Juju points and a physical conditioning elixir as rewards for accomplishing a minor training mission. He was thus feeling quite content at that moment. Nevertheless, he quickly moved on to studying the rest of the info under the G.O.A.T MISSIONS tab.

There were three missions still pending on the system interface. The first was the 2013 Tippeligaen Serial Challenge which Zachary was about to complete. He'd already won the league with Rosenborg and realized one of the system milestones. With that achievement, he'd met the lowest mission completion requirement and also escaped the penalty.

However, he was still eagerly awaiting Rosenborg's last match of the season against Lillestrøm SK the following Sunday. He could only complete the rest of the mission milestones and receive the associated rewards after the final matchday. That caused his heart to caper with excitement since more than 7000 Juju points plus a dosage of an A-graded vitality-enhancing-elixir were imminent.

The second pending mission was the Norwegian Football Cup Serial Challenge. Rosenborg had defeated FK Haugesund in the semi-finals of the Cupen and qualified for the finals in his absence. As a result, he was on the cusp of realizing most of the milestones of that mission. As long as he helped his team defeat Molde in the finals, he would earn a bountiful sum of Juju points from the system.

The third pending mission was the 2013/14 Europa League Serial Mission. Zachary was far from realizing any of its milestones. His team, Rosenborg, had lost all its opening matches in the group stages of the Europa League in his absence. He was on the verge of suffering a system penalty after failing to realize even a single mission milestone for that mission.

Zachary's expression darkened every time he took a glance at the Europa League mission details. However, he'd already vowed to stop sobbing over spilled milk. What mattered the most at that moment was putting up his best performance to help his team qualify for the knock-out stages. That way, he could escape the system penalty of 120,000 Juju points.

"It all starts with the match against Red Bull Salzburg next Thursday. As long as we win, we'll keep our hopes of qualifying for the next round alive. I won't give up as long as there is even the slimmest hope of realizing the goal."

Zachary let out a pent-up breath and switched to the home page of the system interface. Without further ado, he started examining the information on the page.

\*\*\*\*

SOCCER G.O.A.T SYSTEM

SYSTEM LEVEL: 3 (3900/10000 Juju-points to level-up)

USER: Zachary Bemba

AGE: 18 years

TALENT ASSESSMENT: Grade-A

JUJU-POINTS: 3900

(Evaluation: A remarkable young professional player)

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USER MENU

\*USER STATS

\*G.O.A.T MISSIONS

\*SYSTEM SHOP (1 message)



\*SYSTEM LOTTERY

\*SNOOPING TOOL

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NB: Please level up the system to unlock more functions.

\*\*\*\*

Zachary had completed several minor system missions over the past eleven months. As a result, he'd already amassed a bit more than 1000 Juju points in rewards, bringing his total stock to 3900 points.

He was a moderately wealthy man with regard to Juju points. Moreover, as long as he realized a few more milestones of the pending missions, he would have enough capital to upgrade the system. He would then get the chance to unlock more system functions.

"It all begins with the match next Thursday," Zachary mumbled, pumping his fist to motivate himself. Without further ado, he closed the interface and headed to the shower to clean up.. He still had to meet with his fitness trainer, then Emily and Kristin later that day.

Chapter 257 - New Fitness Coach I

Zachary exited his apartment after feasting on a late sumptuous breakfast that morning. A few minutes later, he was nestled in his R8 GT and well on his way to the Lerkendal gym to continue his training. He navigated the late morning traffic at a steady and unhurried pace, pondering his training priorities for the upcoming few months.

His long-term target was leveling up his core attributes, including strength, body control, and agility, to the S-grading, preferably before the forthcoming season. That would put him in the perfect position to perform better and much more consistently while minimizing the risk of injury throughout the entire season. To achieve that goal, he'd even hired a professional fitness coach to guide his training over the course of the following few months.

As a professional, Zachary had long understood that football was an intensive sport that involved a great deal of running. A first-rate midfielder like the future N'Golo Kanté could cover a distance of 10 to 13 km, including a great deal of sprinting, during particularly intense matches. So, Zachary had long tuned his training priorities towards the technical aspects of the game while also focusing on improving his cardio levels. As long as he wasn't injured, he would never miss out on going through agility or endurance drills, even on the most hectic of days. That had helped improve his skills and fitness at an insane rate over the previous two years.

With such a prodigious rate of improvement, he had previously not seen any need to alter his training regimen or hire a professional trainer. He'd been self-assured right until the moment he suffered an injury two months prior. Right after that, he'd realized that his training regimen was inadequate for the professional level.

Zachary had finally been forced to admit that he lacked the technical know-how to design a training regimen involving carefully planned measures to reduce the risk of injury. Thus, hiring a fitness trainer was the first thing he'd done after his recovery. He was on his way to meet the trainer that late morning.

A few minutes later, he carefully steered his R8 GT in one of the allotted parking spaces for official team players at the Lerkendal parking lot. Without dilly-dallying, he picked up his gym bag from the boot and made his way to the gym at a steady pace.

The time had already clocked half-past eleven, and the late morning sun was already shining brightly upon the nearly empty majestic Lerkendal Stadium. The autumn weather was simply perfect as the temperatures were not that extreme. It was neither too hot nor too cold. Zachary could not help but slow down slightly to appreciate the great weather and the sights around him.

"How's your morning, Zachary?"

"Zachary, congratulations upon winning the first trophy with Rosenborg..."

The Rosenborg employees working on the pitch greeted him with zest wherever he passed. There was an unmasked air of euphoria about them after Rosenborg's league victory the previous night. Almost everyone wore grins from ear to ear, taking some time off from their duties to exchange a few words with him.

Zachary didn't dare ignore them since he respected their efforts that kept the pitch in perfect condition all year round. He responded to their salutations with polite words and occasionally took the time to sign a few autographs before continuing on his way.

He made it to the gym a few minutes later. As soon as he'd stepped into the free weights section of the gym, he realized that Coach Bjørn Peters, his new fitness coach, was already waiting for him.

Coach Bjørn Peters looked just the way he remembered him from his academy days. He was the typical Caucasian of middling height, with blond hair atop an angular face. His pronounced jawline, coupled with deep-set blue eyes, gave him an austere look that reminded Zachary of the famous actor Dolph Lundgren. He was the assistant coach for the NF Academy and also one of the most reputable professional fitness trainers in Trondheim. Zachary had coughed out a lot of cash to reserve his services for the following few months.

"Good morning, coach," Zachary nodded with a smile.

"Good morning, Zachary!" The coach replied, smiling and giving him a once-over. "Congratulations upon winning the league. I'm truly happy for you. You're the perfect alumnus of NF Academy, the only one to win the league as a first-team player at the age of eighteen. Your success during this season has been the greatest motivating factor for the youngsters back at the academy. I hope you can spare some time in the near future to pay us a visit."

"Thanks, coach," Zachary replied politely. "I can visit the academy in December. But that'll be after our three Europa League matches when my schedule has opened up."

"That's excellent." Coach Bjørn Peters nodded with a smile. "Maybe, your visit will inspire the youngsters to put up better displays during next year's Riga Cup. We've been performing poorly in international competitions since you guys graduated."

"I'm glad to be of some help," Zachary said, settling down on one of the benches in the gym. "You can set up a date and time during early December. As long as you inform me in time, I'll visit for sure."

"I'm glad to hear that," Coach Peters said, his manner turning all professional the next instant. "I've already designed a new three-month training regimen for you. It includes plenty of weight training

routines to help you bolster agility, body control, and both lower and upper body strength. We're starting on it today. So, hurry up and change into your gym attire."

"Aye, coach," Zachary said with a smile. Without further ado, he headed towards the locker room with his gym bag in hand. There, he switched into his gym attire, chugged down some water, and then returned to the free weights section to start the session.

"Let's start with some stretching before we move on to the weights," Coach Bjørn Peters said, taking up a position beside Zachary on the training mat. "Make sure you follow all my motions to the letter. Stay focused the entire time and go through every exercise to the best of your ability. I won't entertain any laxity during the session. Okay?"

"Aye, coach," Zachary replied, nodding as he eyed his new fitness coach with a hundred percent focus. Coach Bjørn Peters was a remarkable instructor who had given him plenty of help and advice during his academy days. Zachary trusted him and respected his opinions as both a football coach and a professional fitness trainer. He was confident his fitness would progress to the next level under his guidance.

"Let's begin!"

#### Chapter 258 - New Fitness Coach II

Without wasting any more time, Coach Bjørn Peters commenced the stretching routine. He started with neck stretches and then performed a series of upper body and standing quad stretches before finishing with a set of Hip Flexor stretches in one go. He was intense, passionate, and highly focused while going through even the simplest of stretches the entire time.

"Don't just stand there, staring," Coach Peters yelled, his tone commanding, without pausing his stretching routine. "Follow my lead and go through the routine carefully, starting with the next repetition."

"Aye, coach," Zachary replied, also beginning the routine. He didn't idle in the slightest for the next fifteen minutes and mirrored Coach Peters' every movement. He performed all the stretches uniformly and flawlessly, like a programmed robot, without any pause until he was out of breath when the session ended. By then, beads of sweat had long settled upon his skin like newly melted snow crystals, showing the degree of intensity associated with the seemingly simple stretching routine.

"Okay, that was a relaxing warm-up," Coach Bjørn Peters intoned, flexing his biceps. His muscle-laden chest and arms were well-toned, making him look more like a bodybuilder rather than a football coach. Just by observing him, you could tell he was a gym fanatic to the very core.

"Let's continue and move on to weights training before our muscles start cooling down."

Without waiting for a response from Zachary, the coach moved towards the rack with weights on one side of the room and picked up a pair of dumbbells effortlessly.

"In today's session, we'll start with a set of single-leg dumbbell deadlifts," he said, turning around to face Zachary. "The single-leg dumbbell deadlift is an exercise mainly comprised of hip-dominant movements targeted towards strengthening the hamstrings. You'll be able to avoid the most common injuries to hamstrings as long as you diligently train following this exercise daily. It will also improve your lower body control in the long run. Are we together, Zachary?"

"Yes, coach," Zachary replied, nodding.

"Then, let's start right away," the fitness coach said, getting into position on the training mat.

Without wasting time, he got into gear and began going through the motions of the single-leg dumbbell deadlift. He started the routine by driving his left foot back — as if he was stamping the bottom of his foot on an imaginary wall behind him while keeping his leg straight. Simultaneously, he gradually hinged at the waist, tipping his torso forward until it was almost parallel to the floor. All the while, he kept the dumbbells in his hands, held straight at shoulder height. His arms remained perfectly perpendicular to the floor. After half a dozen or so breaths, he steadily pulled his left leg forward, keeping it straight while lifting his torso until he was standing again.

"That's the first rep of the single-leg dumbbell deadlift," Coach Bjørn Peters said immediately after. "Have you managed to capture all the motions of the exercise?"

"Yes, coach," Zachary replied, also moving towards the rack to fetch a pair of dumbbells. "I have already captured the entire routine, and I'm ready to join you, starting with the next repetition."

"That's good, then," the fitness coach said, nodding. "Get into position first. We'll go through four sets of ten repetitions while alternating between each leg within the next ten minutes. We'll be taking a 60-second rest between sets and a ten-second rest between repetitions. Are we together, Zachary?"

"Yes, coach," Zachary replied, getting into position on the mat beside the fitness coach. "I'm ready to begin the routine when you are."

"Good," Coach Bjørn Peters said with a smile. "Let's start right away."

Without further ado, Zachary and the coach started going through the motions of the single-leg deadlift with a hundred percent concentration. They performed the routine to the best of their ability until they were sweating all over. However, they didn't just stop at the single-leg dumbbell deadlift for that session. They switched to Barbell Back Squats, followed by Lateral Barbell Lunges and Barbell Bulgarian Split Squats before finishing with Dumbbell Calf Raises an hour later. By then, they were already well out of breath.

"That was a refreshing and enjoyable workout," Coach Bjørn Peters said with a grin after they'd completed the motions of all the weight training routines. "Wasn't it?"

"Yes, it was," Zachary admitted, chugging down some water. He'd fully exerted himself and enjoyed the intensive session designed by the fitness coach. He could already judge that the session had been highly effective — a fact that reinforced his belief that he'd made the right decision by hiring a professional trainer.

"I'm glad you enjoyed it," Coach Bjørn Peters said with a smile. "Let me elaborate on a few points first before we move on to the warming-down stretching routine."

"Firstly, the purpose of the Barbell Back Squats and the Barbell Bulgarian Split Squats is to build the functional leg strength necessary for football. The exercises build vertical pushing strength in the quads while also hitting the glutes and hamstrings. These will translate into jumping and shooting power on the field."

"Secondly, the Lateral Barbell Lunges will help your strength in the lateral plane, which will help streamline your side-to-side movements. Training diligently with the exercise will also strengthen the adductor muscles and reduce the risk of suffering a groin injury."

"Lastly, the Dumbbell Calf Raises will help strengthen your calves, thus improving your running and jumping ability. The exercise plays a massive role in stabilizing the plantar flexing of the foot, thereby reducing the risk of non-impact injuries at the ankle and knee. FYI, the calves are also an important determiner of your agility. You'll find it hard to raise your agility to another level without strengthening calf muscles. So, this is an important exercise for you. Are we together, Zachary?"

"Yes, coach."

"That's good," Coach Bjørn Peters said, taking up a position on the mat once again. "There are a lot of other beneficial exercises that I have included in your training regimen. You'll be able to make a remarkable improvement as long as you persist and go through them together with me for the next three months. I can promise you this. You will feel the true worth of your 210,000 NOK by the time we complete our training together. But that's if you can work hard and follow my instructions to the letter."

"No worries, coach," Zachary said, nodding. "I'm ready to do my best to take my skills to another level. This time around, I'm prepared to spend the months of November, December, January, and February training to the best of my ability. I'll only reduce the intensity before important matches."

"Then, I'm glad," the fitness coach said with a smile. "Let's end our session by stretching to warm down our muscles. We'll meet again tomorrow early, just before your team training, for another session. Please don't be late."

"Aye, coach."

#### Chapter 259 - New Contract And Future Plans

Zachary didn't dilly-dally in the slightest after completing his gym session with Coach Bjørn Peters. He washed up quickly in the dressing room and then donned a new tracksuit before heading to Trondheim Torg for his meeting with Emily.

His R8 GT barely stayed below the speed limit as he traversed the streets of Trondheim. He made it to Cafe Dublin, the agreed-upon rendezvous point, in less than twenty minutes.

Emily Anderson, his agent, was already waiting for him on one of the tables in a far-off corner. She was dressed casually in denim-jean trousers and a stylish dark brown leather jacket. She looked poised like the subject of a piece of art, awaiting his arrival in the slightly crowded Cafe Dublin.

"Good afternoon, Emily," Zachary greeted as soon as he'd settled in one of the seats opposite hers. "I hope you didn't wait for long!"

"Not at all," she replied, lifting her head to glance at Zachary. "I only arrived a few minutes ago. So, no worries."

"That's great, then," Zachary said. "I was worried I'd made you wait. How is your day going? Are you enjoying your stay in Trondheim?"

"My day is fine," she replied, the corners of her mouth rising slightly into a smile. "Whenever I'm here, it feels like I'm on vacation. I'm enjoying every moment. How about you? How goes your preparation for the upcoming Europa League match?"

Zachary took off his baseball cap before answering, "We'll start the preparations for that game tomorrow. Today, we had a day off to recover from yesterday's match. I've been doing some personal training since morning. I've just concluded a training session with my new fitness coach, and it was quite rewarding."

"That's great to hear," Emily said, nodding. "Let's hope he can help you meet all your training targets before the beginning of next season. Should we first order lunch before moving on to business?"

"That would be best," Zachary was quick to reply. "I'm quite hungry since I've been training all day. I would rather refuel first with some food in my belly before discussing any business."

"Okay, then," Emily concurred, raising her arm to signal for the waiter.

A few seconds later, a tall blonde gentleman dressed in a neat Cafe Dublin's waiter's uniform arrived beside their table. "Good afternoon, sir and madam!" He said, bowing politely with a smile. "How may I serve you today?"

"I'll have the Eggs & Bacon served with chips and salad," Emily replied right after taking a glance at the menu. "Top that up with a glass of lemon juice."



"Is that all?" the waiter queried, noting down the order.

"That's all for me," Emily answered.

"And you, sir?" The waiter turned towards Zachary. "What will you be having?"

"Get me a Ribburger served with fried potatoes, plus some chicken salad," Zachary said while still studying the menu. "Get me some lemon juice as well."

"Noted," the waiter replied with a smile. "Your orders will be coming up shortly, in about twenty minutes. Thank you for supporting Cafe Dublin." He stepped away from the table and headed back to the counter.

Cafe Dublin's service was excellent that day. The costumed waiter managed to work on their orders in the promised twenty minutes. Soon, the two of them were feasting on their lunch while making small talk. They concentrated on enjoying the meal and didn't discuss any business until a quarter of an hour later.

"So, how far with the negotiations with the Rosenberg management," Zachary asked after finishing his fried potatoes. He'd already wolfed down his entire meal. Only empty plates remained on the table before him. "Is there any progress? Or are they still insisting on the contract extension?"

Emily sighed, placing down her glass of lemon juice. "I've just finished meeting both the sporting director and the legal advisor this morning. They've finally backed down slightly and promised to offer you much better personal terms if you can extend your contract with Rosenberg for one year — that's until 2015."

"Ohhh!" Zachary said, his pair of eyes going somewhat blank. He couldn't help but fall deep into thought.

Emily had started negotiating a new Rosenberg contract on his behalf in August. However, the negotiations had stalled when he'd gotten injured in the Europa League match against FK Minsk. Despite that, Emily had persisted and continued pushing for a wage increment for him throughout his two-

month hiatus. She'd held several meetings with the club management to make her case, citing his role on the first team before his injury.

Her efforts had eventually paid off a couple of weeks prior, and the Rosenborg officials were finally not totally opposed to the idea of offering him better personal terms. However, they had still insisted that he extend his contract with Rosenborg for two years before they could triple his monthly income. It seemed they had finally relaxed their terms slightly that morning and were only asking him to sign a one-year contract extension that time round. Be that as it may, he was still undecided.

"What's your opinion on their new contract offer?" Zachary asked Emily after a few seconds of deliberation. "Should we take the deal or not?"

Emily's blue eyes lit up after she heard the question. She held Zachary's gaze from across the table before answering, "In my opinion, we should take the deal. They have already offered to triple your monthly income from 400K to 1.2 million NOK — while also offering you plenty of other match bonuses. And the only price you have to pay is signing a one-year contract extension with Rosenborg. So, why not take the deal?"

"I can also see that it's quite a good deal," Zachary replied, leaning forward and lowering his voice. "The 1.2 million and the other benefits are quite tempting. However, my only worry is that this contract extension will tie me to Rosenborg for an extra year after my current contract expires. For me, this is not worth it since I would like to move to greener pastures in about six to twelve months from now."

"Is that so?" Emily's eyes widened for a moment. She quickly placed her glass of juice on the table before glancing squarely at Zachary. "Do you intend to transfer out of Rosenborg in the near future? Please elaborate!"

"The answer is yes," Zachary replied emphatically. "I'll begin considering the possibility of transferring out of Rosenborg around next June. By then, my skills should have improved considerably. So, I'll have the necessary capital to play and hold my own against world-class opponents in the top European leagues."

"I'm glad you're finally considering this possibility," Emily said, her face blooming into a smile. "I totally support this decision since I believe you should begin competing against the best footballers in the world as soon as possible. You'll improve your skills much faster by facing off against fierce competitors. On the other hand, your skills will regress if you remain in your comfort zone and get too used to the glory of dominating the third-tier Norwegian League."

"Then, we are of the same mind." Zachary smiled boyishly, crinkling his eyes. "So, you should be able to see my concerns. This contract extension may cause me trouble if I attempt to transfer out of Rosenberg next year. That's why I'm hesitant to sign it."

"You don't have to worry about the extension binding you to Rosenberg for two more years," Emily said, also leaning forward and lowering her voice. "One: Your contract has a release clause of 50 million Euros embedded in one of the terms. As long as any other team triggers this release clause by making an offer of 50 million, they'll have basically freed you from Rosenberg. But, that's as long as you're willing to join the club that triggers the release clause."

"Two," Emily continued in a steady but calm voice. "Your contract also has a buy-out clause of 24 Million embedded in one of the terms. As long as any club triggers this buy-out clause by making an offer of 24 million to Rosenberg, they can start negotiating personal terms with you during an active transfer window."

"And lastly, I believe that the Rosenberg higher-ups are not trying to pull any tricks to tie you to their club in the long run with the contract extension. They only want you to sign the extension so that they can obtain more bargaining power while attempting to sell you to other clubs. That's my opinion as an agent after tussling with them through negotiations spanning over two months. So, you can see that signing the extension will not have any marked impact on your future. You should take the deal."

"That puts me at ease," Zachary replied, letting out a breath. "You can go ahead and accept the deal on my behalf as long as you can guarantee that the contract extension won't affect my plans of transferring out of Rosenberg. That's my only condition."

"You don't have to worry, Zachary," Emily said, her voice exuding confidence. "As long as you maintain your form over the next few months, many teams will line up to trigger your release clause during the next transfer window. I guarantee this."

Zachary's eyes brightened as he leaned back into his seat. "That's good," he said. "I was worried that I might have to give up the 1.2 million NOK of monthly wage and other additional bonuses. But with your assurance, it seems I can begin enjoying this money starting next December. Isn't that right?"

"Yes, that should be the case," Emily admitted. "The contract documents are almost ready. We were only waiting for your decision. So, you can put pen on paper at the end of this week and begin enjoying the 1.2 million NOK at the start of next December."

"That's awesome," Zachary answered. "I'll leave everything to you. Go ahead and finalize the contract details. You can contact me for my signature when you're ready."

"No problem." Emily nodded, picking up her lemon juice once again. "So, have you already started considering which league you would want to join after completing your spell at Rosenborg?"

"I haven't given it much thought," Zachary replied, planting his elbows on the table. "But if I were to be totally honest with myself, then I would prefer to join either the English Premier League or the Italian Serie A. The German Bundesliga would then be my third choice."

"Ohhh," Emily exclaimed, her eyes lighting up. "Those are some good options. If you don't mind, I can start engaging some of my contacts in those three leagues to prepare for your transfer."

"That's okay with me," Zachary said, smiling. "But please make sure that your actions don't bring me any unwanted disruptions to my career. That's my only request."

"No problem," Emily promised.

Chapter 260 - To Salzburg, Austria I

Wednesday, November 6, 2013.

Red Bull Arena, Wals-Siezenheim, Salzburg, Austria.

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The sun was about to set on yet another hectic day for Roger Schmidt, the head coach of Red Bull Salzburg. At that moment, he was drumming his fingers rhythmically on the lustrous surface of his office

desk, staring intently at the screen of his laptop. Occasionally, he would frown after watching brilliant moments from Rosenborg during past matches as he pondered on how to defeat the Norwegian giants. His body language matched his state of extreme concentration as he devised strategies against his upcoming opponents in the Europa League.

"The world is truly unfair. How did a third-tier team acquire such a monstrous talent?" He thought out loud a short while later. He'd just watched Zachary's long-range shot that resulted in Rosenborg's first goal against Viking the previous weekend.

"This guy is going to cause us a lot of problems if we don't tie him down during the game." He sighed for the umpteenth time since beginning to review Rosenborg's previous matches that day.

Coach Roger Schmidt was in a bit of a dilemma. Red Bull Salzburg's Europa League game against the Norwegian football giants was slated for the following day. However, he was still undecided on what tactics to employ against them despite spending an entire week studying their past match videos. His predicament was for one sole reason — the monstrous talent, Zachary Bemba.

The young attacking midfielder was a true blue freak in human skin on the field. He was capable of invariably coming up with uncanny ways to punish opponents even when his team was playing at its worst. Moreover, he was highly clinical and impressive beyond words whenever he managed to step in the final third. He would turn into a football demon, with flair akin to Ronaldinho and Messi's styles, whenever the goal was in sight. If his opponents made the grave mistake of giving him some breathing space during the heat of the game, he would punish them. That's how he'd managed to score more than twenty goals for Rosenborg in a single season despite not taking part in a substantial chunk of fixtures due to injury.

"What to do?"

Coach Roger Schmidt cast his gaze through his office window, watching the horizon in the west ablaze with the fire of the setting sun. He was in a daze for some time. His mind continued working in overdrive the entire time, deriving strategies that the Red Bull Salzburg team could employ in the upcoming Europa League game. Yet, he still came up short and couldn't conceptualize a satisfying game plan even after deliberating for more than a dozen minutes.

"This is the sort of player who must not be left alone during a match." Coach Roger Schmidt mumbled a few minutes later as he scribbled down a few sentences in his notebook. His fingers started drumming the surface of his table once again as he sank back into his thought process.

Ever since debuting as a football manager back in the day, Roger Schmidt had always been an attack-minded coach in every respect. He disdained defensive football and had always believed the best defense was attacking relentlessly like mad. He had never been satisfied as long as his team failed to score at least two goals in a match. Such a coaching style had won him status in European footballing circles as he grew from obscurity to fame in only a decade.

However, after becoming the head coach of Red Bull Salzburg the previous year, he'd started becoming more reserved and cautious with his tactics. His slight change in ideology didn't come from the bottom of his heart — but was due to the constant pressure from his new coaching responsibilities.

He'd come to understand that the bosses and fans at Red Bull Salzburg were an impatient lot. They didn't even give him enough time to build a squad from the ground up — but wanted to see Red Bull Salzburg winning trophies year after year. Moreover, if he ever lost against a weaker team, they would drown him in a sea of curses. All in all, he had to continue winning matches without fail for any chance of securing his job in the long run.

He had developed the habit of spending hours going over his game plans again and again after taking on the managerial position for Red Bull Salzburg. He always made sure there wasn't a single loophole in his strategy before executing it on the field of play. That way, he'd managed to mentor the Red Bull Salzburg players, enabling them to secure an unshakable position as Austrian League table leaders that season.

"Knock! Knock! Knock!

Rhythmic knocking on his office door broke him out of his reverie a short while later.

"Come in," he said almost instantaneously and a bit impatiently.

The door opened the next instant, and Herbert Ilsanker, one of his assistants in charge of goalkeeping, stepped into the spacious office. He was a rough-looking middle-aged man who'd been working for Red Bull Salzburg since 2006. His many years of service for the team gave him status among the coaching staff and players, which even he, the head coach, couldn't disparage.

"Good evening, coach," the man said, settling into one of the sofas just opposite Coach Roger Schmidt's desk.

"Good evening to you too, Herbert," Coach Roger Schmidt replied, glancing at the assistant with a "what can I do for you?" look.

"It's almost time for the pre-match tactical meeting," the assistant said, his tone cordial. "The players are already gathering in the tactics room as we speak now. We should head over there right away."

"Ohhh! It seems I forgot about the passing of time once again," Coach Roger Schmidt said, smiling ruefully and casting a glance at his watch for the first time in hours. He'd been so absorbed in analyzing Rosenborg games that he'd failed to notice it was already nineteen minutes past six in the evening. It was just eleven minutes to the scheduled time of the pre-match tactical meeting.

"I'll head over in a few minutes. Thanks for reminding me."

"No problem," the assistant said, smiling back. "Is everything ready? How goes the preparations for the match tomorrow?" His tone was laced with a bit of concern as he glanced squarely at the coach.

"I've already designed a game plan for the match," he replied, standing up and closing his laptop. "On paper, it should be just enough to help us dominate the weaker Rosenborg side throughout the entire duration of the match."

"However, I still have this nagging feeling that the Norwegian team will prove to be a tough opponent for us tomorrow. So, I've been trying to devise a strategy to help us restrain their star attacking midfielder — Zachary Bemba, without altering our high-tempo attacking style. If we can contain him in midfield, I believe that we'll win this game with hands down for sure."

"Ohhh!" Herbert said, caressing his bearded chin. "But a single player shouldn't cause you that much unease. Remember that we're the stronger team, the Austrian giants, with plenty of spectacular young talents like Sadio Mané, Kevin Kampl, and Alan serving as our attacking force. They are all goal-hungry forwards and will be looking to tear Rosenborg apart whenever they get the chance. It would be a waste to deny them an opportunity of having a go at their opponents due to some conservative defensive tactics."

"All in all, I believe that we shouldn't change our attacking footballing style for just a single player. Even if he is the second coming of Ronaldinho, he won't affect the overall picture without incredible teammates to support him during crucial moments of the match. If by accident, he manages to score once or twice, then we'll score thrice. If it so happens that he scores three times, then we'll score four times. I believe that that should be our game philosophy."

"Good," Coach Roger Schmidt said, nodding. "You understand me well, Herbert. I'm also of the same view and don't want to give up our attacking flair just for a single player. However, that's the very reason for our dilemma. I've been finding it a bit difficult to develop a strategy that can restrain Rosenborg's young number-33 without having to sacrifice our fast-paced attacking tempo."

Herbert, the assistant, sighed, shaking his head. "As coaches, we can't always control everything on the playing field. There will always be factors out of our control during the heat of the match. That's why even teams like Barcelona and Real Madrid, which have assembled the best squads in the world today, can still lose games. And that's the true beauty of football as a sport. So, as coaches, we can only prepare our teams to the best of our ability before sending them on to the field of play. The rest is up to the players, luck or even an unseen higher power, as some would say."

Coach Roger Schmidt smiled, his eyes crinkling at the corners. He could feel his mind starting to clear after hearing Herbert's words. "You do make a point, Herbert," he said, nodding. "What's there to fear? We've already done our best as coaches to prepare our players for the upcoming match. As long as we stick to our philosophy and attack Rosenborg from the first minute to the very end, we'll have a high chance of winning for sure. Thank you, Herbert, for reminding me."

"It's my pleasure," Herbert replied with a smile. "I'm glad to be of help. Time is running out. We should start making our way to the tactics room. We shouldn't make our players wait."

"Good."