

Greatest 261

Chapter 261 - To Salzburg, Austria II

Thursday, November 7, 2013.

Zachary and his teammates arrived in Salzburg, Austria, by plane at half-past midday. They quickly went through airport procedures and were soon well on their way to Altstadt Hotel Amadeus Hotel by bus.

Zachary was seated in one of the back seats, listening to catchy music through his Sony headphones and gazing out of the bus window. He watched in a daze as imposing structures and Baroque-style cathedrals flashed by as the bus raced through the wide Salzburg streets.

From what he could see, the cityscape of Salzburg was gorgeous and artistic beyond measure. It was a well-preserved historic center and deserved its status as a world heritage site. It had numerous tourist attractions and stunning views.

The buildings that flashed by the bus window came in many styles. There were Gothic churches, monasteries, and even castles, far off in the distance, making the whole urban center seem like a piece of art. Talk about an architectural museum preserved as a city — that was Salzburg for sure.

The bus picked its way through the city until it slowed down after rounding a corner. It pulled into a driveway a few minutes later. There, coming into view, was the majestic Altstadt Hotel Amadeus Hotel, stretching along an entire block. Set on a pedestrian street in the Old Town of Salzburg, it was the perfect array of homey hues interlaced with an ambient medieval feel. Zachary was glad that the refined hotel would be their home during their stay in Salzburg.

"Okay, guys," Coach Johansen yelled from the front when the bus came to a stop before the hotel a minute later. "We're here! Let's move it." He clapped his hands as if to provoke some sense of urgency in the Rosenborg players.

"It's almost coming to 1:00 PM. So, we'll first have some lunch immediately after checking into our rooms. After that, we'll rest for an hour to recover from jetlag before heading to a nearby training ground to warm up our muscles for our game against Red Bull Salzburg. I expect all of you to be ready for the session by 3:00 PM. Okay?"

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

"That's good," the coach said with a smile before leading the way out of the bus.

Zachary was in high spirits as he disembarked from the bus and stepped into the moist autumn air of Salzburg. He couldn't help but take a long look around to savor the scenery.

"What a beautiful city," he mumbled, slinging his gym bag over his shoulder and following his teammates to the hotel's entrance. He'd always enjoyed his international trips as a professional player. The excursions out of Norway brought about a much-needed change of pace in his hectic and monotonous schedule, thereby relaxing his often taut mind.

At that moment, a breeze carrying the aroma of the cityscape, from the automobiles to the nearby River Salzach, blew across his face, washing away his jet lag. He smiled as he pulled the hood of his jacket over his afro.

His heart was already starting to race with anticipation. He was very eager to take part in his first Europa League game after recovering from his injury. He intended to do his best that evening since he understood that Rosenborg couldn't afford to lose another game in the Europa League. His blood was already boiling with the spirit to compete and defeat the tricky Red Bull Salzburg side. That way, he would be a step closer to completing one of the system's Europa League Serial Mission milestones and escaping the system penalty.

Later that Night.

Red Bull Arena, Salzburg Austria.

"SALZBURG! *clap*clap* SALZBURG! *clap*clap..."

"ROSENBORG! BOOO! ROSENBORG! BOOO..."

Zachary stood on the field of play, taking in the hostile screams and roars of the opposing fans as he waited for the referee to blow the whistle to signal the kick-off. He wasn't the least bit intimidated by the stadium's atmosphere, even though the yells were anything but friendly. There was no way a little bit of jeering from the home fans was going to unnerve him that night.

He'd grown more confident in his abilities after scoring a brace against Viking over the weekend. Nothing could come close to affecting his mental state at that moment. He was even less bothered by the injury and was rearing to go and unleash carnage at Red Bull Salzburg's defense.

He was completely calm and free from pressure as he took up his midfield position just a few yards from the center circle. With a soft smile outlining his face, he exuded an aura of both boldness and conviction when he started doing stretches to keep his muscles warm. Anyone could see that he was a man on a mission at that moment.

Zachary could feel his muscles tightening and relaxing with ever-increasing intensity as the kick-off drew closer and closer with each passing second. A few beads of sweat made their way onto his stern face as he cast his gaze onto the other side of the pitch. He couldn't help but fall into a moment of deliberation when he noticed that the Red Bull Salzburg players had arrayed themselves into a 4-4-2 starting formation.

Their set-up was a tell-tale sign of their preferred strategy for that game. Zachary could deduce that they would most likely employ both wing-play and crosses against Rosenborg just by studying their starting formation. What made him sure of his conjecture was that Sadio Mane, a famous number-10 in his previous life, was their left-winger. But the good thing was that there would be an equally studious defender, Eric Bailly, marking the tricky number-10 on that flank. Without doubt, there was nothing to fear as long as the untiring Ivorian mechanic was barring the way of the Senegalese forward. As long as Eric Bailly didn't blunder and score an own-goal while defending, he would be okay throughout the entire game. That was Zachary's belief.. And that was what had already put his racing heart at ease as the anticipated kick-off drew nearer.

Chapter 262 - An Incredible Start

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The referee blew the whistle at 9:05 PM, signaling the start of the long-awaited Europa League match between Red Bull Salzburg and Rosenborg Ballklub. The atmosphere grew more tumultuous and turbulent as all the players on the field turned their sights towards the ball on the center spot. At the same time, cheers rose to a crescendo, drowning out every sound in the entire Red Bull Arena. Tensions were high in the few seconds after the sound of the whistle.

Nicki Nielsen, Rosenborg's center forward, didn't dilly-dally after hearing the kick-off whistle. He cast a fleeting glance across the opposite side of the playing field, seemingly to assess or maybe taunt the opposition before the commencement of the actual action. Without turning around, he raised his leg and then kicked the ball back towards his midfield with a back heel.

"Show off!" Zachary inwardly scoffed at his teammate before turning 180 degrees to follow the movement of the ball. He started running into space as he watched Mike Jensen, one of the holding midfielders in Rosenborg's 4-2-3-1 formation, receive Nicki's pass close to the border of the defensive third.

Without losing a moment, Mike flicked the ball to Thomas Partey, his counterpart in defensive midfield. By then, the Red Bull Salzburg forwards had already rushed into Rosenborg's half, pressing the Ghanaian midfielder and leaving him without enough time to settle down with the ball. They were like a pair of raging wild bulls rushing forward and trying to win possession for the Austrian team as quickly as possible.

"Thomas!" Zachary hollered out loud when he noticed the two opponents bearing down on his teammate like mad. "Play safe! Hit a long one to Nicki." He added as he turned and rushed towards the other side of the pitch.

Thomas Partey, the young midfielder destined for great things, didn't disappoint in the slightest. With a skillful couple of touches, he stepped away from Alan, one of Red Bull Salzburg's two forwards. And without losing his composure, he unleashed a long-range pass to the other side of the field.

Nicki Nielsen reacted immediately on seeing the ball approaching his path. He rushed away from his marker like the wind and jumped high to receive the ball amidst a distinct wave of boos from the home fans.

However, Martin Hinteregger, one of Red Bull Salzburg's center-backs, stuck to him like super glue. The defender didn't allow him an inch of space. He held tightly onto his shirt as the two of them battled for aerial superiority.

It was the first clear brush between the two teams — a spectacle that excited most fans in the stands. The cheers and chants rose to a higher level, seemingly to welcome the upcoming battle between attacker and defender. Eventually, it was Martin Hinteregger, the no-nonsense center-back, who won the battle of wits. He out-maneuvered Nicki-Nielsen mid-air and headed the ball towards Stefan Ilsanker, one of the Red Bull Salzburg midfielders. In that way, he'd managed to diffuse the danger.

The first battle between the two teams seemed to have ended in favor of the Austrian team from Salzburg. The cheers of Red Bull Salzburg's fans hit yet another momentous crescendo as they chanted "Martin Hinteregger" at the top of their voices like mad. Their passion when supporting even a simple defensive play was something that Zachary had never experienced in both his lives. It was only the second minute of gameplay — yet the tensions were already running high on the pitch because of the fans.

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It was at that instant that the referee's whistle sounded. The whistle was like a manifestation of a musical note from hell itself, bringing about the descent of a momentous silence all over the Red Bull Arena. Explore new *novels* on [novelbin\(.\)com](http://novelbin(.)com)

"Free kick!" Zachary heard the referee intone in an indifferent voice as he neared the spot where Martin Hinteregger had taken on Nicki Nielsen only a few seconds ago.

"You pulled Nicki's shirt and prevented him from jumping up to compete fairly for the ball," the referee added, shooing away Martin Hinteregger, who was already in his face. "That was a clear foul. So, please stop complaining."

"OMG! Yes, yes," Zachary yelled, pumping a fist in the air before quickening his step towards the referee. His hopes soared to another level as he realized that the spot for the free kick was only twelve or so yards outside the box. It was in a perfect position — just close to the right flank, where he could punish the keeper with his Bend-it-like-Beckham Juju.

"What a cheap giveaway of a free kick!" Zachary mused as he stepped towards Nicki Nielsen and patted the forward's shoulder as a show of thanks for his efforts. The center-forward had helped Rosenborg obtain a golden chance to take the lead in the 2nd minute of gameplay. Of course, Zachary was appreciative.

"The rest is up to you, Zachary," Nicki said to him after picking himself up from the ground. The center-forward was grinning from ear to ear and didn't look like someone that had just been fouled. He was obviously in a good mood.

"Remember," he continued. "Don't pressure yourself. Relax, and take the free kick as usual. As long as you do that, you'll have a decent chance of scoring our first goal."

"Noted, and thank you," Zachary replied succinctly and then picked the ball from the referee. Without wasting any time, he delicately placed the ball on the green. He took great care throughout the entire process and confirmed there wasn't even a single stalk of grass in front of the ball.

He then took a few steps backward before activating the Dead Ball Specialist Juju and starting to observe both the keeper and the defensive wall. For the next few seconds, his mind was in a state of extreme focus as his eyes took in all the happenings before and within Salzburg's box. He was determined to score Rosenborg's first goal there and then. He couldn't let himself make even the simplest of mistakes at such a crucial moment of the game.

Coach Roger Schmidt was extremely nervous as he watched the goings-on before Red Bull's box. He'd warned his players to beware of conceding unnecessary free kicks within the final third. However, just two minutes into the game, his star center-back had already committed a needless foul just a few yards from the box. As a result, Rosenborg had a chance to take the lead through their monstrous Maestro — Zachary Bemba.

Coach Roger Schmidt could only pray the young number-33 was off-form that evening. Otherwise, there was no way he would miss a free kick in such a perfect position while at the top of his game. That was a deduction that came naturally to him after recalling a few moments from Rosenborg's past matches.

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At that moment, the referee blew the whistle. The sound rang across the then almost silent stadium, causing Coach Roger Schmidt's heart to start pounding with anxiety. Nevertheless, as an experienced coach, he forced himself to calm down as his gaze followed Zachary — who was already making an angled run towards the ball.

The young number-33 was the perfect definition of a skilled and experienced old professional as he made the last jump step towards the ball. His movements were smooth and immaculate, like flowing clouds and the autumn breeze, as he brandished his foot like a whip to send the set-piece barely a foot over the wall. Unsurprisingly, the ball curled over the wall in a perfect arc, flying through the air like a missile before homing into the top left corner.

SILENCE!!!

For an instant, the cheers and boos from the Red Bull Salzburg fans totally vanished. The fans seemed surprised and didn't expect a player from a team like Rosenborg to net such a goal. With an uncanny moment of brilliance, Zachary had unleashed a missile of a shot from around thirty-five yards away to catch the keeper unawares and score Rosenborg's first goal in the 2nd minute.

RED BULL SALZBURG 0: ROSENBERG BK 1

Coach Roger Schmidt sighed, shaking his head after taking a glance at the stadium's jumbotron. It seemed his worst fears were already coming true. However, as an experienced coach, he didn't rush to change his game strategy. What his team had was time to turn things around. He was determined to stick to his philosophy of attacking the opponent like there wasn't a tomorrow. With his team that contained an assembly of talented attackers, he didn't believe that he would fail to score at least two goals in the remaining eighty or so minutes.

"Guys!" He yelled in German at the top of his voice while clapping his hands to motivate his players. "Don't mind! Don't mind! We still have more than eighty minutes remaining to the final whistle. Focus! Focus! Let's teach these Norwegians the meaning of attacking football. Sadio and Kevin! Stop sleeping in the wings. I want crosses floating into the box without a pause..."

The Red Bull Salzburg coach roared out his commands to his players at the pace of machine guns. He seemed unbothered by Rosenborg's opening goal. What was there to fear? His custom was to defend by attacking. If Rosenborg scored one goal, he would score two. And if Rosenborg scored two goals, he would net three. That was his style, and it had slowly become the way of Red Bull Salzburg as well.

Chapter 263 - A Game Of Tactics And Tension

The game restarted immediately after the goal celebrations. The Red Bull Salzburg players went straight into a relentless attacking mode like a pack of hungry predators that had just caught the scent of their favorite prey. They even compelled all the Rosenborg players to return to their own half, save for Nicki Nielsen, the center-forward. Their wing play was phenomenal, with both the uncanny Sadio Mane and the resourceful Kevin Kampl constantly darting on the flanks and floating teasing crosses into the box. They were a tricky side for sure.

Coach Boyd Johansen, Rosenborg's head coach, was standing on the sidelines — in Rosenborg's technical area watching the goings-on on the pitch with utmost concentration. A slight frown framed his face as he observed the game situation leaning more and more in favor of Red Bull Salzburg with every passing minute. Be that as it may, he didn't adjust his tactics even though his team was constantly on the back foot as the match progressed.

He'd opted to play a defensive game, employing a 4-2-3-1 formation from the very start to weather Salzburg's relentless attacks. He was confident in the abilities of his four defenders — Mikael Dorsin, Tore Reginiussen, Yerry Mina, and Eric Bailly.

With support from two holding midfielders, he believed the four defenders would keep the troublesome Salzburg attackers at bay at least until Zachary and company got a chance to counterattack. That was even more so, especially considering their consistent form and solid performances during Rosenborg's past few matches.

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It was at that moment the referee's whistle sounded, breaking his thought process. Coach Johansen's frown deepened after realizing that Jonathan Soriano, one of Red Bull Salzburg's center-forwards, had committed yet another foul. He was a bit frustrated.

A moment ago, it had been one of the rare occasions when Rosenborg had managed to snatch possession from the Austrian giants. Mikael Dorsin, the Rosenborg left-back, had managed to jump high and block a teasing cross from Kevin Kampl, Salzburg's right-winger. The left-back had followed that up with a pretty fast reaction to control the ball before passing it to Mike Jensen, who was in defensive midfield. However, before Mike could settle down with the ball, Jonathan Soriano came rushing in, sending the holding midfielder tumbling to the ground with a sliding tackle. In so doing, the Red Bull Salzburg center-forward had denied Rosenborg the perfect chance to counterattack yet again.

"Their high-pressing is causing us a lot of trouble," Trond Henriksen, the assistant head coach of Rosenborg, commented from beside him. He also seemed quite concerned with the goings-on on the field of play.

"It's already the 20th minute, but their attackers aren't even giving us a single minute to settle down with the ball in the backfield," the assistant continued. "They are always upon our players like hungry beasts whenever we win it back. That's why we're losing out in ball possession and failing to mount effective attacks on their goal. We have to do something about this, or else we'll concede sooner or later."

Coach Johansen nodded in affirmation, his eyes never leaving the field of play. It was frustrating to play against an attack-minded team like Red Bull Salzburg. Ever since the restart of the game, the Austrian giants had not allowed the Rosenborg players even a moment to breathe on the field of play. Whenever Red Bull Salzburg would lose possession, the whole team would try to recover it as quickly as possible. The nearest three, or sometimes even four, players would immediately counter-press the Rosenborg player in possession. They would either get the ball or commit a foul — but would not let the opponent escape.

But that was not all that made them a very tricky side. Most of the Red Bull Salzburg players, including the attackers — Sadio Mané, Kevin Kampl, Jonathan Soriano, and Alan, were very swift and highly agile. They were a highly efficient bunch both when high-pressing and counter-pressing.

Even more embittering was that the defensive full-backs and the two midfielders were also highly aggressive in their style. They tended to leave their positions to partake in the press high up the pitch. They had unceasingly overwhelmed the Norwegian side as a result.

All in all, the Red Bull Salzburg team was like a well-oiled machine that continuously forced the Rosenborg defenders and holding-midfielders to play long balls. The Norwegian giants hadn't even gotten an opportunity to play a series of the more efficient short passes through the middle ever since the commencement of the game. That was because such a short build-up was too dangerous against Red Bull Salzburg's high pressing.

"Let's not rush to make any changes for the moment since our defense is doing fine," Coach Johansen said to his assistant after a few seconds of deliberation. "I'm sure that our players will get used to the quick tempo as the game progresses. After that, they will be able to react accordingly to the high-pressing and counter-pressing tactics of Salzburg. We might even manage to score a second goal if that happens."

"Ohhh! Okay," Trond Henriksen, the assistant, replied, seemingly still concerned. "But just in case things go south, we should maybe prep some substitutes. In such a high-tempo game, there's a high likelihood that a few of our players might suffer injuries or run out of stamina. So, I'm suggesting we make some contingencies against such situations."

"That's just fine," Coach Johansen replied offhandedly. "You can go ahead and inform John Chibuike, Jonas Svensson, and Ole Selnaes to start warming up on the sidelines. Maybe, their warming up will motivate our players to put in more effort to adapt to the game quickly."

"Good," Trond Henriksen replied, nodding. "I will do that right away."

Coach Johansen returned his full attention to the match immediately after Trond Henriksen had stepped away to prep the substitutes. His players had opted to take the free kick short only a while ago. But they had lost possession to the relentless Red Bull Salzburg players after a minute or so of trying to hold the ball in the backfield. From then on, the game situation was back to the Austrian giants dictating the tempo on the field of play.

Nonetheless, the Rosenborg players continued defending as if their lives depended on the game, without allowing the Red Bull Salzburg attackers to make any shots on goal. Both Yerry Mina and Eric Bailly, Rosenborg's latest additions, were instrumental in keeping the score level. Time and time again, the two defenders managed to explode with incredible displays to frustrate the agile Red Bull Salzburg attackers. Anyone could tell that they were budding world-class defenders for sure.

However, as a fact, it was difficult for any player to maintain a high level of concentration throughout a long duration of a high-tempo match. That was especially so for a young and inexperienced player like Eric Bailly, Rosenborg's right-back. In the 42nd minute of the game, he was out of position for a brief moment. In so doing, he allowed Sadio Mané, the troublesome Red Bull Salzburg left-winger, to receive the ball without any pressure on the flanks.

"Close him down, quick!" Coach Johansen hollered out to his players right after noticing the defensive blunder. His heart was pounding hard like it wanted to jump out of his chest as he watched the Salzburg winger set off on a mazy run along the touchline on the left flank.

Trouble was on the way for Rosenborg, thus bringing unprecedented excitement to the Salzburg fans. The cheers of the home fans hit yet another thunderous zenith.

"SADIO! *clap*clap* MANÉ! *clap*clap* SADIO..."

They sang at the top of their voices, cheering on their star winger to move the ball forward. What passion! What intensity! Their enthusiasm was out of this world, and their chants filled with palpable emotions, depicting their love for their team. At that moment, it was like the Red Bull Arena was experiencing a mega-earthquake.

Encouraged by the cheers of the fans, Sadio Mané was like a resourceful and experienced formula-one driver. He raced with the ball along the touchline on the left flank, slithering past a couple of Rosenborg players like a slippery snake navigating the jungle. In a matter of seconds, he started cutting into the pitch and was soon one-on-one with Yerry Mina, Rosenborg's center-back.

Coach Johansen's heartbeat accelerated, despite himself. It was the most dangerous moment for Rosenborg — one which caused beads of sweat to start rolling down along the outlines of his face. Nonetheless, he watched intently without even blinking as the tricky winger played a one-two with Alan, the Red Bull center-forward, to rush past Yerry Mina and step into the box.

Without losing his composure, the tricky Senegalese received a return pass from Alan before unleashing a right-footed attempt towards the bottom left corner, just inside the near post. His accuracy was so precise that he placed the curling shot barely a few centimeters away from the reach of the diving keeper.

A moment of silence seemed to descend all over the Red Bull Arena since the keeper was absolutely already beaten. The cheers stopped in those few moments when the ball was hurtling towards the goal. Tension was in the air since Red Bull Salzburg was moments away from scoring their first goal and bringing matters back to level.

STIFFNESS!! PRESSURE!! TENSION!!

Time seemed to have come to a standstill as a few more beads of sweat made their way down along Coach Johansen's face. But he didn't dare blink as he continued following the route of the ball. It was then that a swift silhouette rushed in from who knows where. With an uncanny acrobatic flair, the shape in the white and black Rosenborg jersey dived in with the head — first — and then blocked the ball just as it was about to make its way past the goal line.

"OHHH, NO!!!"

A collective sigh rang throughout the stands of the Red Bull Arena. Eric Bailly, the Rosenborg defender, had managed to rush back in time to save the situation. He had jumped in without fear and relied on his head to bar Sadio Mane's shot from making it into the back of the net at the very last moment. What a courageous play! What decisiveness! The fans could only let out sighs filled with desolation as they watched the ball rolling out of the field.

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The referee blew the whistle soon after. He stopped in one position and then pointed towards the corner flag.

"Corner kick!"

Coach Johansen sighed with unmasked relief. At that moment, he felt like he'd just jumped out of hell and descended back on earth.

"Guys!" He started shouting at the top of his voice while clapping his hands. "Stay focused! Don't leave any opponent unmarked when you defend the corner. Don't allow them even an inch of space..."

Chapter 264 - A Dire Situation

On the pitch, Zachary quickly made his way back to Rosenberg's eighteen-yard box to help his team defend against the corner. He was determined to prevent Red Bull Salzburg from scoring by doing his part to the best of his abilities.

He immediately picked out André Ramalho, a tall Red Bull Salzburg center-back, and man-marked him like mad. Furthermore, he also didn't forget to holler out some warnings to his teammates and advise them to tightly mark other dangerous opponents like Sadio Mané and Jonathan Soriano. He only relaxed after making sure that there was no unmarked Red Bull Salzburg player in the box.

FWEEEEEEEE

The referee blew the whistle after a short while. The players of both teams within the box immediately started pulling and pushing one another, trying to outmaneuver their opponents while awaiting the corner ball. It was complete pandemonium in the box to the point that the referee had to intervene and delay the corner for a couple of minutes. The situation only calmed down when the referee showed a couple of yellow cards to players from both teams. Even Zachary got off with a verbal warning since he'd been stealthily pulling at his opponent's shirt.

FWEEEEEEEE

The referee blew the whistle once again after settling the chaotic situation in the box. Stefan Ilsanker, one of the Red Bull midfielders, immediately floated a teasing ball into the crowded box, sending the stadium into a wave of thunderous cheers once again.

Within the box, Zachary wasn't the least bit affected by the thunderous cheers of the home fans. He'd shut out everything else and only focused on the incoming ball and his opponent - André Ramalho. Thanks to his high game intelligence, coupled with his extreme state of concentration, he deduced the ball trajectory and its final destination almost instantaneously.

As luck would have it, he could tell that the corner ball was coming right towards his position in the box. He didn't dare take the situation lightly at that moment. Without losing a second, he pushed off the ground like a kangaroo, outmuscled André Ramalho, his opponent, midair, and then headed the ball out of the box to safety. However, before he could let out a breath of pent-up air and settle back on the green, the referee's whistle sounded once again.

"What the hell is happening?"

Zachary could not help but frown as he turned his attention towards the referee. He shuddered despite himself when he noticed that the referee was pointing to the penalty spot. At that moment, it was as if the referee had just banished his heart from heaven to hell. He was both infuriated and confused by the referee's decision. He was even considering the prospect of rushing towards the ref and giving him a piece of his mind.

"Stay calm! Stay calm!" Zachary mumbled to himself while trying his best to tamp down his frustration. It was then that he noticed that André Ramalho, the Red Bull center-back that he'd been marking during the heat of the corner kick, was on the ground. The six-foot Brazilian was rolling on the green while hiding his face in-between his palms like a wounded animal.

MADNESS!!

"What the hell is happening?" Zachary couldn't help but explode with fury as he rushed towards the referee. He could no longer contain his rage after noticing that his opponent was trying to frame him for a foul he hadn't committed. "Ref, I am innocent," he added, stressing word for word. "I didn't even touch him when I was contesting for the ball. Surely, it's just simulation to win a penalty."

"Elbow," the referee replied simply with a single word while showing a yellow card to Zachary. He then shooed Zachary away with a wave of his hand before going to check on the Red Bull Salzburg center-back, who was still rolling on the ground.

Zachary wanted to put in a few more complaints and justify his case. That was because he was pretty sure he hadn't committed a foul. But before Zachary could say anything else, a firm grip around his waist pulled him away from the referee's position. On turning around, he noticed that Mikael Dorsin, Rosenborg's assistant captain, was the one holding on to him tightly and signaling him to remain silent.

"Can you please calm down for a moment?" Mikael whispered while glancing at him squarely. "The referee has already awarded the penalty. So, there's nothing you can do since he has already made the decision. Complaining won't get you any results but a red card."

"So, I'm begging you to settle down and ignore the referee's decision. Remember that all the hopes of the fans, the management, and coaches are resting upon us. They want us to win this match and keep our Europa League dream alive. So, we can't let something like anger drive our actions while on the pitch. Are we together, Zachary?"

Zachary nodded to indicate that he understood. He knew where Mikael was coming from, considering the situation of the match.

If he persisted and argued with the referee, he would get himself a red card just before halftime. Then, Red Bull Salzburg would utilize the remaining minutes to tear them down like wolves attacking a herd of helpless sheep for sure. Rosenborg would then lose the game, and their hopes of qualifying to the next round of the Europa League would come to an end there and then.

"What a close call!!"

Zachary could not help but tremble all over after realizing that he'd been only moments away from attracting a red card from the referee due to an argument. Without saying a word, he closed his eyes for a few seconds and took in a drawn-out breath of air to calm himself down. When he next opened his eyes a few seconds later, they were as serene as a pool of calm water, without any undulations or waves.

"Thank you, Mikael," he said to his assistant captain.

"I'm glad you have calmed down," Mikael replied with a smile. "As footballers, we'll always have moments when we can't control our emotions. It may be because of a poor refereeing decision or simply from the frustration of losing the game or something else. But we have got to try our best to control our tempers simply because the calmest players on the pitch are usually the ones who emerge victoriously."

"I understand," Zachary replied once again.

"Good," Mikael replied, nodding. "Then let's prepare for the penalty."

The cheers reached another crescendo after the referee organized most players out of the box for the penalty. At that moment, the only field players still in the box were Jonathan Soriano, Red Bull Salzburg's center-forward, and Daniel Þorlund, Rosenborg's goalkeeper. The two of them would face off in a battle of wits a few moments later.

Zachary had positioned himself a few yards beyond the arc of the 18-yard box. He felt as if he'd just stepped into a pile of shit and found it hard to breathe even though there wasn't any other field player in his close vicinity. Who wouldn't after giving away a penalty during a crucial match?

FWEEEEEEEE

The referee blew the whistle and motioned for Jonathan Soriano to take the penalty a short while later. It was the moment of truth. Would it be the highly clinical Red Bull Salzburg forward that would prevail? Or, would the highly experienced Rosenborg keeper come out on top?

Zachary didn't care for any wild guesses. His heartbeat accelerated as tension gripped his entire being as he watched the Red Bull Salzburg center-forward make an angled run towards the ball.

"Please don't go in! Don't go in!" He couldn't help himself but mumble when Jonathan Soriano finally raised his leg and unleashed the long-awaited shot from the penalty spot.

Despite having S-grade stamina, Zachary even experienced shortness of breath as he followed the trajectory of the ball heading towards goal. It was one of the stiffest of moments he'd faced ever since turning professional.

Time seemed to slow down for the briefest of seconds — and then the possibility with the lowest probability of occurring happened the next instant.

Zachary felt like he'd just escaped from hell to heaven as a wave of disappointed sighs of the home fans rang across the entire Red Bull Arena. He was giddy with excitement and even yelled out at the top of his voice to express his relief.

"What a save!"

Daniel ?rlund, Rosenborg's keeper, had committed himself to a full-body dive towards his left and managed to snatch the penalty ball from midair. With that incredible save, he'd denied Red Bull Salzburg a chance to score yet again, sending the stadium into a state of momentary silence.

"Why does this situation seem so familiar?" Zachary mumbled silently to himself as he watched the experienced Rosenborg keeper holding the ball to his chest.

Then it all came to him, and a light bulb went off in his brain.

Without any needless words, he turned around and accelerated almost instantaneously towards the other side of the pitch. It looked like the devil himself was chasing after him as he darted through the middle of the field. His only hope at that moment was that Daniel ?rlund, Rosenborg's keeper, would spot his run as soon as possible and release him for a counter. That way, he would be able to catch the Red Bull Salzburg players unawares for the first time since the commencement of the match.

The lucky stars of Rosenborg seemed to be aligned well that day. Daniel ?rlund, Rosenborg's keeper, appeared to have read his mind like an open book. Just as Zachary was fast approaching the center circle, he noticed the keeper had just unleashed a long one-handed throw towards him. It was the perfect release of the ball right before the Red Bull Salzburg players could react.

Zachary, of course, went into action on seeing the ball approaching his position at the boundary of the center circle. He slowed down slightly before turning around to jump and meet the long throw midair. His motions were as smooth as flowing clouds while chesting the ball down the green. Without losing a moment, he spun 180 degrees and continued towards Red Bull Salzburg's goal like the wind.. The counterattack was on.

Chapter 265 - A Wonderful State

Zachary darted across the pitch like a bullet, leaving both opponents and teammates in the dust. He could even feel the chilly autumn breeze whipping across his face as he ran like mad and tried to make the best of the counterattacking opportunity. However, he couldn't help but slow down a moment later.

Two Red Bull Salzburg players had managed to catch up to him and bar his path before he could carry on with the counterattack. So, he couldn't just continue racing carelessly with the ball towards the other side.

"What to do?"

Lightning-fast thoughts swirled through Zachary's mind as he took the briefest of moments to assess the two opponents that had just cornered him. Within an instant, he managed to recall all the information about them. The first player was named Christian Schwegler, Red Bull Salzburg's right-back known for his long throw-ins, while the other was Christoph Leitgeb, a solid and creative right midfielder.

The two players were not impatient as they confronted him. They just blocked his path towards their goal without trying to tackle the ball from his feet. Moreover, they had angled their bodies in such a way to force him towards the left flank. They seemed intent on just delaying him while waiting for their teammates to array themselves back into a proper defensive shape.

"This can't go on," Zachary decided.

Everything was hanging on a thread since the other Red Bull Salzburg players were almost catching up. If he couldn't beat the two defenders blocking his path within a maximum of five seconds, he would have wasted the opportunity for sure.

"This can't do!"

Zachary strained his mind to the extreme limit, trying to catch on to that slim chance to make the best of the situation. Possible running routes towards goal, standing gaits of opponents, the distance between opponent and ball, and many more factors ran through his mind, swirling about like waves of a raging Tsunami. The lightning-fast thoughts stirred up his mind until he couldn't think of anything else anymore.

His mind was a complete blank and in a state of stillness a moment later. Then, it all happened at once, and a wondrous and familiar feeling bloomed in the deep confines of his mind. Within an instant, a lot of information flooded into his brain, giving him a clear picture of everything around him.

At long last, he'd managed to enter the zone once again.

Zachary's heart skipped a bit when he noticed that he had a complete grasp of each and every bodily movement of the two opponents cornering him. He could see them clearly. Be it facial expressions or even the peculiarity of their strides and gaits — he managed to capture them all in anything but an instant. It was as if he had developed a superior awareness for any small thing in the space around him. Moreover, it seemed his mind was working better than usual when he was in that uncanny state. He'd even deduced the best way to open up the quickest route towards goal as a result.

What a feeling!

A soft smile outlined Zachary's face as he started flicking the ball from his left to right foot the very next instant. The difficulties that had puzzled his mind a moment ago seemed to have disappeared almost instantaneously right after he'd entered the zone. It was as if the world was in slow motion.

However, he understood that it wasn't the right time to explore the feeling of being in the zone. Four seconds had already elapsed since he started his face off against the two opponents. If he continued dragging his feet, he would have to face off against many more opponents — a situation that could snuff out Rosenborg's chance of executing a successful counterattack.

Thus, without any more dilly-dallying, he got into action right away. He first tapped the ball slightly using the outer toe area of his right foot without letting it move far away from him. Without a pause, he caught the ball before dragging it back towards himself to complete a basic Elastico dribble. And just as he'd expected, one of the players barring his path moved forward slightly and stretched out a boot to tackle the ball.

Chance!!!

Zachary felt like he'd unloaded a weight off his shoulders when he noticed that the player had taken his bait. Without losing a second, he moved like a thunderclap.

He feigned going left before halting abruptly and then moving right. Like a cheetah in the wild, he accelerated almost instantaneously, squeezing through the gap in-between the two players. Before the two opponents could adapt, he was already a couple of meters beyond their reach, his strides eating up yards of space like there was no tomorrow.

However, he was not in the clear yet. Another opponent had already caught up to him when he was dealing with the other two. Nonetheless, he didn't panic. He could beat any defender out there while in the zone. His superior awareness granted him the ability to see every movement of the opponent seemingly in slow motion. Through mere observation, he could even predict the actions of the opponents to some extent.

So, when the approaching opponent tried to grab his shirt and foul him, he reacted accordingly. He hinged at the waist and leaned forwardly slightly, barely dodging the grabbing hand of the Red Bull Salzburg player. After that, he didn't look back a single time and continued en route towards the opponent's box like a flash. He'd already left every other player in the dust. At that moment, only the Red Bull Salzburg keeper was remaining between him and the goal.

Zachary, of course, didn't disappoint. With just a couple of deft touches, he skillfully skipped past the keeper, who'd rushed out of his box to meet him. He then buried the ball into the back of the empty net from a tight angle, sending the Red Bull Arena into a state of momentary silence. What a goal!

Red Bull Salzburg 0: Rosenborg Ballklub 2.

Zachary had managed to score Rosenborg's second goal just before the break in the 45th minute. However, he didn't pause his run. Instead, he raced all the way back to Rosenborg's box like the wind and then celebrated with Daniel Þorlund, the goalkeeper.

Cheers, yells, and boos were like thunder upon the ears as the match progressed. The atmosphere in the stands was turbulent since the Red Bull Salzburg fans continued cheering their team like mad even after halftime. It was as if they wanted to help their team score at least a goal by the sheer will of their words. They were really a passionate bunch.

Nevertheless, there was also a pair of odd men out within the assembly of home fans in the Red Bull Arena. They watched the goings-on on the pitch with analytical eyes and didn't partake in the cheering even once. The two of them appeared totally detached from the chaos around them and seemed not to belong in the home fans section. That was because they didn't care about the game's results and were only at the stadium as scouts to assess a single player.

"Emily was right about this one," Edward Atkins, the younger of the two men, said, trying his best to make himself heard over the din in the stadium. His eyes were wide, slender, and sharply outlined with a keen gaze. A spade-shaped goatee, matching well with his raven-black hair, supplied him with an imposing look that made him appear proud.

"True," Mike Brown, his counterpart, replied from beside him. This one was actually a man later on in his years, with a bald head and bits of grey in his facial hair. "Emily really picked up a gem. Stamina, composure, skills, and sharpness with the ball — he has them all. Moreover, he's a dead ball specialist to boot. I can already see him helping us win the Premier League if we can convince him to join us."

"It won't be easy to get his signature," Edward Atkins commented, his eyes never leaving the field of play. "With the way he is playing, I'm sure that a lot of the top teams will be lining up to compete for his services."

"But we have an advantage," Mike Brown, the aged man, chipped in. "We should be among the first teams from the top leagues to notice his monster-level talents. So, we only have to rush in headfast and have a heart-to-heart with him before others take note of his skills. The best would be if Emily could help us."

"You should forget about her," Edward Atkins said, sighing and shaking his head. "Emily has already declared that she won't help us with the client in any way. She has already done enough by informing us about such a player before talking to the other teams. So, let's try not to burden her anymore."

The aged man sighed. "She's just like her father, always putting principles above everything else. She can't even help her home team obtain the services of such a genius! It's truly a pity."

"That's what makes her so good at her job even at such a young age," Edward replied. "Let's first watch the match. We'll discuss afterward."

"Good."

Coach Johansen was all smiles as he followed the progress of the game from Rosenborg's technical area. His mind was at ease since his players had managed to hold on to their two-goal advantage despite being under a constant barrage of attacks from Red Bull Salzburg. Hope had already bloomed inside him since they were almost winning the game with a clean sheet. As long as they could defend well and hold on for the next ten or so minutes, they would secure the much-needed three points. That way, they would be a step closer to achieving the almost impossible dream of qualifying for the next round of the Europa League.

FWEEEEEEE

It was at that moment that the referee blew the whistle and pointed towards the corner flag. Sadio Mane, Red Bull Salzburg's winger, had just made yet another crazy run through the flanks before unleashing another attempt on goal from the outside of the 18-yard box. It had been another tense moment for Coach Johansen and his players. However, Daniel Þorlund, Rosenborg's goalkeeper, had been alert and reacted promptly to push the ball out of play with his fingertips for a corner kick.

The Red Bull Salzburg players were obviously in a hurry to restart the game. They quickly organized themselves to attack the corner in a matter of seconds. And without any dilly-dallying, Kevin Kampl, Red Bull Salzburg's right-winger, matched their urgency and floated in a teasing cross into the crowded box.

What followed was another critical moment for Rosenborg. Alan, one of Red Bull Salzburg's two center-forwards, jumped high and planted a header towards the goal from around the penalty spot.

TENSION!!! PRESSURE!!!

The ball flew towards the top right corner like a bullet, thus eliciting another wave of thunderous cheers from the home fans. However, Daniel Þorlund, the Rosenborg keeper, was alert once again. He jumped high and managed to direct the ball out of play with a heavy punch. As a result, Red Bull Salzburg had once again failed to score in the 84th minute.

FWEEEEEEE

The referee blew the whistle and pointed towards the corner flag again. Kevin Kampl didn't waste even a second sending a lofted corner ball into the box. However, that time around, Yerry Mina, Rosenborg's

center back, managed to outjump the entire crowd of players within the box to send the ball faraway towards the right flank with an imposing header.

It was then that Tobias Mikkelsen, Rosenborg's right-winger, reacted and chased after the ball like the wind. He relied on his incredible pace to reach it close to the touchline on the right flank before any other player on the pitch. Without losing a moment, he brought it under control with an outstretched boot before taking off like the wind towards the other side of the field.

Another Rosenborg counterattack was on.

Christoph Leitgeb, one of the Red Bull Salzburg midfielders that hadn't participated in the corner kick, soon came to close Tobias down. However, the right-winger fed the ball past him and then beat him for pace. He continued darting along the touchline so fast like a bullet train on the rails and managed to make it to the final third in only a matter of seconds. His pace was extraordinarily out of this world.

Coach Johansen could already feel his blood boiling with anxiety as he watched Tobias end his run with a grounded pass diagonally towards the box. What a chance! It was another rare precious opportunity for Rosenborg — one which the coach wanted his players to capitalize on and seal the game.

The goddess of luck seemed to be with Rosenborg that day. Tobias' cross managed to dart across the entire pitch and make its way into the path of Nicki Nielsen, who was arriving at the far post. And of course, the ever-reliable Nicki Nielsen, Rosenborg's center-forward, didn't disappoint when it came to matters within the box. He pounced forward like a flash before tapping the ball into the back of the net with an outstretched boot.

Red Bull Salzburg 0: Rosenborg BK 3!!

Coach Johansen roared out loud, punching his fist repeatedly into the air to celebrate the goal. He was beyond excited since the impossible had just happened.

His team had scored the third goal against a Europa League veteran team in the 87th minute. What a night! He couldn't remember the last time he'd been that excited.

"Guys!" He roared out loud after his players had finished celebrating the goal. "Focus and defend! Let's do our best to prevent the opponents from scoring. Only three minutes plus added time remaining. Defend! Defend and Defend!"

Coach Johansen continued roaring out his commands at the pace of a machine gun throughout the remaining few minutes of the game. He ensured that his players stayed in a proper defensive shape, weathering Red Bull Salzburg's barrage of attacks. He was determined to maintain his first clean sheet in the Europa League.

A few moments later, Coach Johansen let out a pent-up breath of air after noting that the Rosenborg players were quite receptive to his commands. They followed his instructions to the letter and defended as if their lives depended on the game. As a result, they managed to hold on to their three-goal advantage until the sound of the final whistle resounded across the Red Bull Arena.

The entire Rosenborg team spent the night at the Altstadt hotel Amadeus Hotel after the match. All the players were all in a jolly mood as they had just hammered Red Bull Salzburg 3:0. Moreover, they'd kept their hopes of qualifying for the next round alive by gaining their first three points in the Europa League. So, they spent a couple of hours celebrating in the hotel bar and only went to bed very late that night.

The next day.

The Rosenborg players returned to Trondheim by plane in a triumphant mood. They then utilized the entire Friday to recover from match fatigue before diving back into serious training the day after.

Since they'd already won the Tippeligaen and were without any pressure, the training session that Saturday was a light one. The players only went through simple team drills to prepare for their final Tippeligaen match for the season against Lillestrøm Sportsklubb before calling it a day.

Sunday, November 10, 2013.

The Rosenborg players boarded an afternoon Scandinavian Airlines flight at around 1:00 PM and then headed to the city of Lillestrøm. On reaching Lillestrøm, they enjoyed a light meal that served as their lunch before resting for an hour. After that, they traveled by bus to a nearby training ground to put in a few hours of additional training. They spent almost two hours warming up their muscles — and soon it was the time for the match against Lillestrøm Sportsklubb.

For that match, Coach Johansen benched most of the first-team players. The likes of Zachary, Mike Jensen, Thomas Partey, Nicki Nielsen, and Mikael Dorsin could only watch the clash against Lillestrøm Sportsklubb from the sidelines. Despite that, Rosenborg still started the match with a bang and took the lead very early in the first half. By capitalizing on a mistake made by one of the Lillestrøm SK defenders, John Chibuike, Rosenborg's left forward for that match, netted to give the visitors the lead just after eleven minutes of gameplay.

However, the Rosenborg field players didn't take the foot off the gas even after scoring the first goal. Pushing for a second, John Chibuike came close once again, banging a header on the woodwork, before Jonas Svensson, Rosenborg's midfielder, grazed the post with a free kick.

Excellence!! Brilliance!! Teamwork!!

The Troll Kids were on fire throughout the entire first half and early stages of the second half. But despite their dominance, they were unable to double their advantage against Lillestrøm Sportsklubb until late in the second half.

It was Mix Diskerud, Rosenborg's defensive midfielder, who bagged Rosenborg's second goal. With a thunderous effort from outside the 18-yard box during the 70th minute, he managed to beat the keeper and fire Rosenborg into a seemingly unassailable position.

However, that wasn't the end of the tantalizing action that day. That was because the action on the pitch grew more exciting and pleasing to the eyes after Coach Johansen introduced both Zachary and Nicki Nielsen into the game in the 80th minute.

Zachary, on his part, was on fire right after entering the field of play. He immediately linked well with John Chibuike before unleashing a long-range missile of a shot towards the goal. However, the Lillestrøm keeper was alert and managed to save the effort, thus keeping the score 0:2 in favor of Rosenborg.

Nonetheless, Zachary was not discouraged by his failure to score. Instead, he continued pushing forward and linking up well with Nicki Nielsen until he managed to bag a goal on the counterattack in the 87th minute. With that, he'd taken his season tally to twenty-one goals, thus cementing his position as top scorer for the Tippeligaen that year.

Chapter 267 - Reflections And Aspirations

The next day.

Zachary woke up to the steady pitter-patter of rain upon his bedroom window. The sound was the perfect natural lullaby, so delicate and soft upon the ears. It gently induced a state of calmness upon his mind and soothed his entire being to the very core. With eyes still at rest, he started reflecting on his second life in those few blessed moments of tranquility and solitude brought about by the morning rain.

His accomplishments in his second life were like events in a spectacular legend. He'd arrived in Norway only three years prior. With the aid of the system, coupled with his hard work, he'd managed to impress his coaches and graduate from the academy in only two years. He'd then joined the Rosenborg senior team and made it to the starting lineup in just a couple of months. It was an incredible journey, one that surprised many, for sure.

Yet, he hadn't just stopped at that. He'd put his career above everything and continued toiling assiduously, even though he'd already achieved his primary goal of becoming a professional footballer. Day after day, he constantly exerted himself beyond words, sharpening his skills with a consistency akin to that of a pre-programmed robot.

Set pieces, dribbling skills, passing, and game theory— he trained all aspects of his game, bringing them to a level way beyond the zenith of his previous life. He was the true definition of a training maniac with a never-say-never attitude that allowed him to develop his abilities at an incredible rate.

As a result, he managed to shine brilliantly in his first season as a Rosenborg player. It was as if he was flying and soaring towards the heavens since he'd already helped his team win a league trophy by

scoring more than twenty goals in his first season. He was, of course, the season's top scorer — and as a consequence, he was the darling of everyone — the fans' favorite at Lerkendal.

Nevertheless, at the end of it all, he'd realized that becoming the best player in a low-tier league could no longer satisfy him. He yearned for more. He wanted to move on to greener pastures and face off against the best players in the world. He desired to know how it felt to play in one of the top leagues of the world.

If he threw everything to the wind, he might have even initiated his transfer procedures out of Rosenborg during the upcoming transfer window in December. However, circumstances didn't allow him to do as he pleased just yet.

Firstly, he still had a pending system mission that necessitated him to stay with Rosenborg at the very least until May next year. He'd to help the Norwegian giants qualify for the 2013/14 Europa League's round-of-sixteen or incur a very cumbersome system penalty totaling 120,000 Juju points. Moreover, he'd freshly come to realize that qualifying for the round of sixteen didn't just mean qualifying out of the group stages. Instead, he'd to help Rosenborg go past the second round of thirty-two teams before reaching the round-of-sixteen stage. It was a tall order for sure. Nevertheless, he didn't believe in giving up before trying. He was still determined to try his best to realize the goal despite the high odds stacked against him.

The second reason he couldn't just up and transfer out of Rosenborg was the inadequacy of his abilities. He was well aware that his skills, which could dazzle both fans and opponents in Norway, would fall short when put up against top world-class defenders. Say, he'd to face off against no-nonsense defenders like Branislav Ivanovi?, Sergio Ramos, or Dani Alves — he wouldn't be able to outmaneuver them that easily. With his skill set, he could only put up a sub-par performance against them.

However, that wasn't enough for him.

He wanted to continue dazzling and impressing both fans and opponents even when he joined the best leagues. He didn't want to sit on a top team's bench just because of his lacking skills after his transfer.

Those lofty aspirations fueled his insane training and prompted him to hire Coach Bjørn Peters as his fitness trainer. He was a man with a clear purpose of raising his fitness and skills to the next level within the shortest time possible.

Zachary's mind seemed to be drifting on calm seas. His musings were aimless as those of a child on summer vacation, paddling, at ease with the fluidity of time. He thought about many things, including his past deeds, his present circumstances, and future prospects.

But soon, his thoughts returned to the moment in the present. The pitter-patter of the rain, loud on his window, soon became the center of his focus once again. He blinked his eyes reflexively and directed his gaze towards his bedside clock.

"Ahh!"

He couldn't help but yelp in surprise on realizing that it was already 9:00 AM. He had several commitments that day, the first being a signing ceremony for his contract extension at Lerkendal later that morning. He'd to finish his morning routines as soon as possible and then meet up with Emily before the actual signing ceremony. He was on a tight schedule for sure.

So, without dragging his feet, he jumped out of bed and flexed his limbs out of habit. It was a practice he'd developed to check the state of his body every morning.

"Being on the bench clearly has its advantages," Zachary concluded, grinning from ear to ear as he trekked towards his living room. "I don't feel any post-match fatigue weighing down on me. I'll continue following Coach Bjørn Peters' training regimen after the signing ceremony since I'm fresh and still full of energy."

He was in a good mood after realizing that he could continue with his hectic training schedule. His muscles were full of energy since he had only come on as a substitute late in the match against Lillestrøm Sportsklubb the previous day. He didn't need any post-match recovery rest. So, without any dilly-dallying, he immediately started going through a simple stretching routine almost by reflex.

Neck stretches! Cobra stretches! Knees-to-chest exercises! Spinal twists! Upper back stretches! Standing-quad stretches! Hamstring and calf stretches! Etcetera.

Illuminated by the first morning rays of the late autumn sun seeping through his living room window, he performed all the motions of the exercises in sequence without cutting corners. His movements were as fluid and delicate as those of a ballet dancer as he went from one stretching routine to another. He

didn't want to make any mistakes when performing the stretches since he understood their importance, especially in the long run.

The seemingly simple routine was part of a long-term training regimen designed by Coach Bjørn Peters to enhance his body control and agility over time. So, he didn't dare take it lightly since he particularly yearned to improve those two stats to the next level within the shortest time possible.

Zachary was sure that he would be akin to a tiger with wings if he could raise his agility and body control attributes to the legendary S-grading. His dribbling would become much more fluid, thereby allowing him more versatility when on the pitch. Without a doubt, he would instantly gain the ability to hold his own against even the best defenders in the world with the elevation of those two stats.

Moreover, he would also meet the requirements to master the Robinho step-over Juju should he raise his agility and body control to the S-grading. He would then gain the ability to cut through assemblies of top defenders like a sharp knife cutting through vegetables. Who, then, would be his opponent? The answer was "no one" since he would already be able to send any defender out there packing with just a couple of step-overs.

Zachary could feel his heartbeat accelerate just by thinking about the prospects. Since young and even at the zenith of his previous life, he'd always admired footballers who were good at dribbling the ball. The likes of Ronaldinho, Messi, the two Ronaldos, and Maradona would always make his blood boil with excitement whenever he watched them perform their magic on the pitch. At their peak, those legends had time and time again terrorized top world-class defenders with their agile footwork. They were, without a doubt, phenomenal players at the level of monsters, even across generations. And, of course, Zachary wanted to follow in their footsteps.

In addition to developing into a fully-fledged Maestro, he'd always wanted to add another dimension to his game. He yearned to combine his high-level passing skills and his game intelligence with unmatched dribbling skills as soon as possible. That was the source of his motivation and his envisioned shortcut to greatness.

Zachary continued going through the simple routine for fifteen minutes. He then performed a dozen or so yoga poses as a surplus to his morning training before heading to the bathroom to wash up.

Chapter 268 - New Endorsement Deals

Zachary exited his apartment and jogged down the stairs like a whirlwind. He was soon in the comfort of his R8 GT on his way to Lerkendal. Visibility was still low due to the rain. However, the headlamps of his car shone through the late autumn fog like smudged stars, illuminating everything in their path. They afforded him some measure of clarity, keeping him from crashing into the vehicles ahead as he cautiously navigated the morning traffic.

After a few minutes, he pulled up into the parking lot at Lerkendal. He alighted from his vehicle, shielded from the rain by a jacket, and made his way to the canteen to meet Emily.

He found Emily already waiting for him at a corner table. She wore a simple but fitting dark blue pull-neck sweater that brought out the rich color of her eyes. A solemn air hovered about her, like one of those magistrates overlooking a courtroom, as she sat there sipping her coffee.

"You're late again," she immediately voiced a complaint as soon as Zachary settled in the seat opposite hers. "If you had delayed a few more minutes, we would have missed the executives for sure."

"The morning rain delayed me a bit," Zachary replied and decided to change the train of conversation right away. He didn't want to tango with her over his time-keeping habits once again. "How's your morning, by the way?"

"Same as always," Emily replied, a soft smile outlining her face. "Congratulations upon winning the Tippeligaen's golden boot, by the way. You were phenomenal once again during the match yesterday."

"Thank you," Zachary replied, grinning. "So, should we head to the board room and sign the new contract with the Rosenborg executives. I want to conclude this business as quickly as possible since I have to meet my fitness coach in the afternoon."

"There's still time," Emily said, glancing at her phone screen. "A few minutes are still remaining to 10:30 — which is the agreed time for the contract signing ceremony. Let's use the time to discuss some other important business."

Zachary leaned back into his chair. "I'm all ears," he said, glancing squarely at Emily. "Go on!"

"Well," Emily said, a mysterious smile framing her features as she held Zachary's gaze. "Your performance against Red Bull Salzburg was incredible. As a result, a few companies have just tabled mouth-watering endorsement contracts before me. Are you interested?"

"Of course, I'm interested," Zachary replied, sitting bolt upright almost immediately. "Which companies?"

"There's Nike, for one," she responded, punctuating her words with a sip on her coffee. "There's also Pepsi, EA Sports, and Red Bull, among a few others."

Zachary's heart stirred. All the companies that Emily had just mentioned were among the biggest names in the world of endorsements. For a moment, he couldn't come to terms with the fact that they were interested in his signature.

"How much are they offering?" He asked after a short while.

"The money is not a lot at the start," Emily replied with a sigh. "But no need to worry about that. First of all, their contracts are long-term. Secondly, they have clearly laid out clauses to increase your yearly remuneration as long as you achieve particular milestones during your career."

"For instance, Pepsi promises to pay you 500,000 Euros per year right after signing the endorsement contract. But, they will increase your annual remuneration to 1 million Euros if you manage to join one of the first-tier leagues in Europe within the next three years. Provided that you maintain your form in that league, you'll be entitled to receive the money from them annually. And FYI, the Pepsi offer is almost the same in structure and wording as the other contracts I've received from several companies in the past few days so far."

"Then, let's go ahead and accept all the contracts we can," Zachary was quick to reply. "For the start, we can go with the top three companies — Pepsi, Nike, and EA sports. But that's as long as they don't have any ridiculous clauses in their contract offers."

"Okay." Emily nodded, leaning back into her seat. "I'm still negotiating terms with their representatives at the moment. But, I should be able to finalize everything before the Christmas break."

"Good," Zachary replied, smiling boyishly and crinkling his eyes. "By the way, that reminds me. I want to start investing some of the money in my bank account. My preferred investment mode will be injecting money into stocks and real estate. Do you know anyone who can help me look into companies with available stock for sale?"

"That's simple," Emily replied, sipping her coffee. "I know the right person to help you assess this year's IPOs all over the world. She's a friend and an investment consultant, who was the same year as me at university. She's very brilliant and phenomenal at assessing investments. Her offices are in London. But if you're interested, I can contact her to come to Norway and meet with you as soon as possible."

"What about the costs?" Zachary pressed. "Are her services affordable?"

"Very," Emily replied. "The most she can charge you a year is about 50,000 Euros. But I'm sure she will charge you less since I'm the one that referred you to her."

"That's good, then," Zachary replied with a smile. "Please go ahead and contact her as soon as you get time. It would be good if we could meet before Christmas."

Zachary hoped to use knowledge from his previous life to make money through stocks and real estate. However, he couldn't recall the majority of the companies that made it big in his later years since he hadn't been keen on business matters. The only big name that came to mind among all the IPOs before 2015 was Tesla Motors. But that wasn't enough for him. That was why he needed a professional to compile a list of companies worldwide suitable for investment. He would pick out several prominent names from the list by relying on bits and pieces of memories from his previous life. What would follow would be harvesting cash, of course.

"No problem," Emily replied, beaming. "I'll contact her this evening. If her schedule is clear, she may even be able to come to Norway to discuss business before the end of the month."

"Thank you," Zachary said, smiling back at her. "I appreciate your help on this. It's important to me."

"You're welcome," Emily replied, placing her cup of coffee down. "It's almost 10:30. We should make our way to the board room. I hope you have read through all the clauses of the new contract. Have you?"

"Of course, I have," Zachary said, standing up from his seat.

"Do you have any questions? Is everything clear?"

"I have no issues with the contract extension," Zachary replied. "I'm ready to sign it at any time as long as you give the go-ahead."

"Then let's go to the board room and sign it," Emily said, also rising from her seat. "However, I expect you to take me out for lunch afterward. I think I deserve that." She added jokingly while picking up her handbag.

"No problem. It's a deal."

Chapter 269 - Interlude

Zachary successfully met the Rosenberg executives and signed the contract extension that morning. The terms of the new deal tied him to Rosenberg for two more years in total.

He had to play for the Norwegian giants throughout the twelve months of 2014, as specified in his first agreement with the club, plus the entirety of 2015, as stipulated in the contract extension he'd just signed. Nonetheless, he would still be free to negotiate personal terms with any club that triggered his buy-out clause of 50 million Euros throughout the contract's duration. The only condition was that the negotiating club was not a direct competitor of Rosenberg in the domestic league. That is, it had to be a team from outside of Norway.

Additionally, Zachary became eligible to receive 1.2 Million Norwegian Kroner as monthly remuneration, plus loads of appealing match bonuses, beginning with December. It was a good bargain — one that elevated Zachary's status to the list of highest earners in the Norwegian Football League. He was, of course, quite contented.

After signing the contract extension, Zachary kept true to his promise. He took Emily out for lunch to celebrate their success. Together, they enjoyed a fulfilling full-course Norwegian meal at the Robust Bistro restaurant before parting ways.

As planned, Zachary met with Coach Bjørn Peters, his fitness trainer, at one of the training grounds of Rosenborg later that day. The two of them went through agility and endurance-enhancing cone drills under the glare of the afternoon sun. They only parted ways two hours later, with both their shirts drenched in sweat — an emblem of their exertion during the intensive exercise session.

However, Zachary didn't feel exhausted despite doing drills the entire afternoon. So, he decided to practice his set-piece technique on the empty training field to pass the time.

He quickly set up a wall of mannequins in front of the goals and fetched balls from the equipment room. Not long after, he was unleashing set-piece after set-piece, repeatedly, over the defensive wall into the back of the net.

He was very diligent while training his set-piece technique, always maintaining a steady and uniform shooting posture every time he took a shot. He would always approach at measured speed from a 45 degrees angle before taking a final jump step towards the ball. With movements as seamless and deft as Beckham in action, he would then smash the ball while leaning back slightly to send it curling over the wall and into the back of the empty net.

Uniformity! Consistency! Insane repetition during practice!

Those three were the few guiding principles he'd long imposed upon himself to take his set-piece technique to the topmost level humanly possible. With the right attitude and an insane amount of relentless training, he believed that he would become the best free-kick taker in the world sooner or later.

He didn't just hope to become another Messi, Nakamura, or David Beckham but surpass them. He yearned to raise his technique to a level that could cause terror in the minds of opposing goalkeepers with just his presence on the pitch.

"Zachary!" A loud yell from the sidelines brought his motions to a pause after he'd just finished sending another set piece over the wall.

He turned around immediately and noticed three of his newest teammates approaching from the sidelines.

The over six-foot-tall Yerry Mina was in the lead and seemed to be the one that had called his name. Slightly trailing behind him was Thomas Partey, the defensive midfielder, and Eric Bailly, the defender. They were in full training attire, looking all imposing in Rosenborg tracksuits, and seemingly prepared for training.

"What's up, guys?" Zachary greeted them with a wave. However, he didn't step away from his position in front of the wall of mannequins.

"What's up, Zach!" The three of them replied, each of them taking turns to step forward and bump fists with him. They seemed to be in high spirits, probably because of Rosenborg's spell of wins over the past few weeks.

"Isn't this a day off for the entire team?" Zachary asked in a joking manner while giving each of them a once-over. "Why are you guys here while you're supposed to be resting back at home?"

The three of them laughed in response to Zachary's question.

"My bones ache if I spend a day without playing some football," Eric Bailly supplied. "Football is like an addiction to me, a drug I can't do without on a daily basis. What about you? We could ask you the same. Why are you sweating alone here on the training ground when it's supposedly a day of rest?" The Ivorian's eyes crinkled slightly at the corners as he gazed squarely at Zachary.

Zachary just laughed in response without giving any verbal explanations.

"Anyways, Zachary!" Yerry Mina interjected a bit impatiently, changing the direction of the conversation. "We want to play a two-touch rondo of three-against-one. But we are missing one person. Is it possible for you to join us after your set-piece practice?"

"I can join you any time you're ready to begin," Zachary, of course, agreed.

A rondo was a keep-away-style drill used as a training tool at all levels of football, from amateurs to professionals. In a rondo game, one group of players would try their utmost to keep possession of the ball while completing a series of passes in a designated space on the field. At the same time, a smaller group of players (sometimes a single player) would try to win the ball back from the bigger group and take possession.

It was an effective tool to teach a player the competitive aspects of the game when done right. From the seemingly simple game, one could learn how to fight to make space in tight situations, what to do when or when not in possession, how to play one-touch soccer, and how to win the ball back. A player could improve all perspectives applicable to competitive football, except shooting, through a rondo. It was a divine tool on a training field, the sort of drill any player should never miss when there was a chance.

So, without dilly-dallying, Zachary joined the three players for a rondo. They played the simple game, alternating the player in the middle time and time again, until long after the sun had sunk below the horizon in the west. By then, they were sweating all over and out of breath. However, they were all smiles as they had enjoyed themselves and benefited greatly from the exercise.

"We should do this more often, especially whenever we have a day off from training," Thomas Partey suggested as they sat on the green under the illumination of the floodlights after the workout. "What do you, guys, think?"

"I'm in," Eric Bailly was the first to reply, in between gasps of breath.

"Count me in, too," Yerry Mina also concurred in between a couple of lower limb stretches on the green.

"I'll also join whenever I don't have an appointment with my fitness trainer," Zachary said while remaining still on the ground. He was totally spent since he'd been exercising for hours prior to the arrival of the others. He didn't have the energy to do even a couple of stretches at that moment.

"There's no need to worry about the get-together interfering with your personalized training, Zachary," Thomas intoned. "I'll communicate beforehand to make sure that we're all free before we meet. That way, we'll avoid interruptions to our other plans."

"That's perfect, then," Zachary said, smiling.

"Great," Thomas said with a smile. "I'll communicate when we'll be meeting next this week."

"Okay," Zachary said before changing the topic. "I'm really excited since we'll be facing Molde in the Norwegian Cup final in two weeks. If we can defeat Ole Gunnar Solskjaer's men, we'll achieve our first double with Rosenborg. Are you guys ready?"

"Of course, we are," Eric Bailly was quick to reply on behalf of the rest. "I'm ready to give everything in that match to lift my second trophy with Rosenborg. Even if Ole Gunnar Solskjaer, himself, joins in on the action on the pitch, I have faith we'll still win. Let's face it. We're a team that just defeated Red Bull Salzburg three goals to nil in the Europa League. How could we lose to the shrimp soldiers and crab generals under Ole?"

"My thoughts exactly," Yerry Mina added with a chuckle.

"You guys should take that game seriously," Zachary warned after noticing their attitude towards their opponents in the finals of the Norwegian Cup. "Molde has always been very tricky, especially against Rosenborg. That is a fact proven throughout the long history between the two clubs."

"Moreover, the Molde players and coaches are under tremendous pressure from their fans since they did very poorly in the league this season. They have never been more determined to win the Cup final. I'm sure that they will do everything within their power to win that game. If we let our guard down, we'll find ourselves stumbling when we're just a step away from the double."

"You're right, Zachary," Thomas said. "Molde will surely come at us with everything they've got. It's good that we have an entire thirteen days without competitive football. That's enough time for us to prepare adequately and then pulverize Ole's men in the final. Don't you think so, Zachary?"

Zachary suppressed a laugh. "Of course, if we prepare adequately and play at our best in the final, we're favorites to win. There's no question about that."

"My point exactly," Eric chipped in with a grin. "The game that really has me worried is our next Europa League game against Standard Liège on the 28th of November, the Thursday after our final with Molde. Should we lose, our Europa League campaign for this year will be over. That would really be a bummer."

"We'll win," Zachary said confidently. "As long as we do our best on the pitch, we'll surely succeed and send Standard Liège packing out of the Europa League."

Eric Bailly gave a hearty laugh after hearing Zachary's declaration. "I'm glad you're confident, Zachary," he said, jumping off the ground with zest. "You only need to handle the attacking bit and score at least a goal. On our part, we'll make sure that the Belgians don't even get a chance to make any meaningful attempt on our goal."

"Really?" Zachary looked at the Ivorian skeptically.

"Of course," Eric assured, thumping his chest. "As defenders, we'll do our utmost to maintain another clean sheet for that game. So, all you have to do is to put one in the back of the net. Then, the game will end there and then."

"You said it yourself," Zachary said, picking himself up from the ground. He'd already regained some stamina after resting for a bit. "I'll have to hold you to your promise on that day, Eric. Mark my words."

"Good." Eric nodded.

"It's getting late," Zachary said, rubbing his hands together to chase away the cold. "I'm suggesting we do some stretches before calling it a day. What do you think, guys?"

"Why are you in a rush to head back home?" Eric queried, grinning from ear to ear. "Is there a hot girl waiting for you back home?"

The others laughed at that.

"That's not the case," Zachary said, sighing. "It's just that I need to go to bed early today so that I can be ready for the team training tomorrow."

"Ohhh!" Eric exclaimed, leaning forward and widening his eyes. "What a bore! All you think about is sleeping and training. And here I thought that a certain supermodel was waiting for you somewhere."

Zachary could only sigh and shake his head at that. "Let's stretch and call it a day," he said and got into motion right away.

"Okay, okay, stretching it is."

Chapter 270 - All-Out Training

Zachary concentrated chiefly on training for the next few days. He would start his day with stretches and a yoga routine followed by a five-mile jog before sunrise. He would then feast on a sumptuous breakfast, carefully selected by a nutritionist recommended by one of his coaches, before heading to Lerkendal and participating in Rosenborg's official team training.

In the evenings, just before sunset, he would attend a two-hour gym or cone drill session directed by Coach Bjørn Peters, his fitness trainer, before heading back home. At night, just after having dinner, he would end his days with another yoga routine before retiring for the night.

Day in, day out, he constantly exerted himself and approached his limits by training like never before. His determination was almost soaring through the sky and shooting to the heavens. Nothing could divert his attention from his pursuits — not even Camilla, his beautiful and charming girlfriend.

Be it the weight training, the cone drills, the stretching, the shuttle runs, and knee tuck classic planks — he performed them with a hundred percent zest. He followed the training regimen designed by Coach Bjørn Peters to the letter, never missing a single repetition of the included workouts.

What were a little sweat and a brief period of solitude versus achieving his goals? Nothing mattered except honing his skills and raising his fitness to the next level.

He was the ultimate incarnation of an exercising demon, sparing time for nothing else. His yearning to increase his body fitness, especially his body control and agility, in a short period pushed him to cast away all distractions and overcome all obstacles, including his physical limitations. He was a man with a

clear goal in mind and didn't complain a single time as he performed routine after routine for days to the best of his ability.

Despite his intensive personal training, his performance during official Rosenborg team training sessions remained stellar. He was still hardworking and brilliant whenever the Rosenborg coaches instructed him to perform a drill or work with the ball during practice. It was like he possessed unlimited reserves of stamina since he was relying on the system's physical-conditioning-elixirs to push through hectic exercising regimens.

His work rate astounded many. Even Coach Johansen, who was often guarded with his compliments, lauded his relentlessness, perseverance, and level of focus in those few days before the Norwegian Cup final. While assisted by the system, he was simply a tireless monster in human skin.

The days passed quickly, seemingly in a flash, as Zachary toiled day in and day out to improve himself. The weather gradually grew colder, and the days became shorter as winter approached with regal ease. However, all that didn't affect Zachary's training in the slightest.

There was a fire burning within him despite the growing coldness around Trondheim. It was the flame of ambition, akin to a series of never-ending sparks that spurred him on to give his all in those rare few days without competitive football. He didn't even feel the passing of days as his entire focus was on honing his skills and raising his fitness. And without him realizing, the day of the Norwegian Cup final grew nearer and nearer, sending the entire Norwegian football community into a hubbub of activity.

Thursday, November 21, 2013.

It was another cold evening with Trondheim tucked under a woolen dove-grey sky. Dusk had come sooner than expected, stealing away all warmth as the last of the sun's rays became cosseted behind the soft grey clouds.

Yet, on that chilly evening which could induce shudders within any warm-blooded creature, there was activity ensuing on a particular training ground at Lerkendal.

Two men — one black and another Caucasian, were going through a series of agility and endurance-enhancing drills under the illumination of the floodlights that encircled the training ground.

Clad in lavish sets of cold-resistant sports gear, including hoodies, gloves, rain jackets, and tights, they went about their business in an orderly and systematic way. Whenever the Caucasian man would weave through cones and move to the left, the tall black man would instantly follow. Whenever the former would make an abrupt turn, the latter would do the same. They were like a pair of synchronized gymnasts, performing drill after drill uniformly without mistakes.

"Let's do one more set of crisscrossing shuttle runs before we stretch and call it a day," the Caucasian said in an authoritative tone in between gasps of breath. He was Bjørn Peters, Zachary's fitness coach.

"Aye, coach," Zachary replied, wiping the moisture off his brow with the sleeve of his jacket. He was sweating despite the cold.

"Just follow my lead," Coach Bjørn Peters instructed with a smile. "One, two, three... Let's go!"

He took off like a bullet without waiting for Zachary to respond. Zachary was, of course, already used to his fitness trainer's tricks. He took less than a second to gather himself and mirror the coach's actions. Soon, the two of them were doing crisscrossing shuttle run after shuttle run like a pair of pre-programmed androids.

Run, abrupt-turn, touch the ground, and then run again — they went through the drill with a hundred percent focus, without taking any breaks.

"That's enough for today," Coach Bjørn Peters shouted a few minutes later, bringing the drill to an end. "But don't you dare rest, yet. We need to do some stretching to cool down our muscles before ending the session. Are we together, Zach?"

"Yes, coach," Zachary, agreed like a dutiful soldier.

"Good. Let's start."

The two exercise maniacs didn't waste any time getting into motion. They started with neck stretches, then did a couple of shoulder stretches before ending with a series of forward and backward arm circles. After taking a few seconds of rest, they went straight into stretching their lower bodies. Butt kicks, knee hugs, front-to-back leg swings, lateral hip swings, rotational windmills, and ankle rotations — they performed all the stretches in sequence without cutting corners. They only ended their movements ten minutes later when they were out of breath once again.

"Okay, that's the end of today's evening session," Coach Bjørn Peters said immediately after. "How do you feel?" He glanced squarely at Zachary, his eyes crinkling at the corners.

"To be honest, I'm totally spent," Zachary replied while chugging down some water. "But I feel fulfilled. My muscles seem to come alive every time I go through these drills."

"That's good," the fitness trainer said, also picking up a water bottle from his gym bag. "I can tell that your fitness is improving with every passing day as we work together. As long as you persist, you'll be able to make remarkable improvements within just two to three months. That, I can promise you."

"Then, I'm glad," Zachary said with a smile. "I'm willing to do any kind of exercise that can improve my fitness quickly."

"Good," the fitness trainer said, giving Zachary a thumbs-up. "But you should also note that too much haste in fitness training makes waste. Training continuously for long periods without giving the muscles time to recover will not yield the expected results. Rather, such training may cause more harm than good. Are we together, Zachary?"

"Yes, coach." Zachary nodded.

Of course, he understood he had to rest for a couple of days in-between successive intensive training regimens. However, on his part, he didn't need a lot of time to recover since he possessed an ample supply of cheat-like elixirs from the system shop.

With just a B-grade dosage of a physical-conditioning-elixir, he could condense the necessary recovery time from days into hours and continue training without facing any mishaps. So, he wasn't worried that he would break himself due to intensive training. However, since the coach didn't know about his cheat-like elixirs, he still needed to humor him by continuing to listen seriously.

"It's good that you understand," Coach Bjørn Peters said with a smile. "If I recall correctly, your face-off against Molde in the Norwegian Cup finals is on Sunday at 2:00 PM. Is that right?"

"Yes, coach," Zachary answered. "That's true."

"Then, roughly two days are remaining to the match," he said, caressing his chin as his eyes focused far off in the distance. He looked like he was deep in thought, pondering something before his eyes abruptly returned to the moment a dozen or so seconds later.

"For the next two days, we won't be doing any intensive exercises," the fitness instructor announced suddenly.

"Why?" Zachary couldn't help but frown.

"The reason is simple," Coach Bjørn Peters articulated, a signature professional smile outlining his face. "Your muscles need time to recover and get back into tip-top shape before the final. Otherwise, if we keep on with the same training system until Sunday, you'll risk injuring yourself during the match. Even if you don't suffer any injury, you'll still not perform at your best since you will be suffering from a light case of muscle fatigue."

"Ohhh!" Zachary said a bit doubtfully.

He wanted to voice a complaint but then stopped himself on second thought. He'd hired the fitness coach with the intent of receiving professional guidance from him and avoiding pitfalls like injuries that would hamper his training. So, he wasn't about to disregard his instructions just because he was impatient to raise his attributes to another level.

"So, for the next two days, we'll have to take it easy," the coach continued in an enthusiastic tone, obviously unaware of Zachary's inner reflections. "You're only allowed to do yoga, a couple of stretching routines, and some light ball work until Sunday. I'll also take you for a professional sports massage

tomorrow and the day after so that we can help your muscles recover much quicker than usual. Are we together, Zachary?"

"Yes, coach," Zachary replied, making sure to maintain a polite smile on his face the entire time.

"I'll repeat this once again to ensure that we're on the same page," the coach said in a solemn tone. "Remember, you're not allowed to do any intensive exercises before the final. That's the only thing I'm requesting from you this time around, Zachary."

"Coach, I get it," Zachary replied. "I have taken your words to heart and won't be doing any intensive exercises until after the match. Please, be rest assured."

"That's good, then," the fitness trainer said, picking up his gym bag from the green. "Let's call it a day for now. I'll see you tomorrow when we're heading for the massage."

"Okay, see you tomorrow, Coach," Zachary said. "Thanks for the guidance. Have a goodnight."

"Goodnight to you too, Zach!" the coach replied before starting to walk away. "Don't stay up late."

"Aye, coach"
