

Greatest 271

Chapter 271 - Heart-Stirring Message

The pale crescent moon was already shining like a silvery claw in the night sky when Zachary departed from the training ground at Lerkendal. He wasn't in any hurry to head back home since he didn't have to wake up early for training the following day. He cruised at a leisurely pace, lazily steering his R8 GT through the evening traffic as he slowly made his way back home to Stj?rdalsveien.

He reached his apartment building roughly thirty minutes later, not long after the 8 o'clock music request hour had commenced on the local radio. With a practiced hand, he carefully parked his R8 GT in his allocated parking spot in front of the building before picking his gym bag from the boot and slinging it over his shoulder. Without dragging his feet, he locked his ride before starting to make his way up the stairs to his apartment on the sixth floor.

Just as he stepped past the apartment on the fifth floor, he couldn't help but slow momentarily. For a couple of seconds, he was a bit undecided as he briefly pondered whether to knock on Kristin's door to say hi. But on taking a glance at his watch, he ruled out the notion.

It was already past eight in the evening, way past visiting hours. Kristin Stein had most likely already loosened up from her day mode on such a cold night. That was even more likely since she had started attending university a few months prior. If she wasn't about to rest for the night, she would probably be tackling some coursework or something else related.

He quickened his steps and ascended the remainder of the stairs like a whirlwind. He made it to his apartment not long after and quickly had a light meal to sate his hunger. After that, he went through another yoga routine, carefully stretching his tired muscles until they felt totally relaxed before heading into the bathroom for a shower.

A short while later, he was already all cleaned up and ready to jump into bed for the night. So, he downed a few glasses of water to hydrate himself through the night before making his way to his bedroom. However, it was at that moment that his phone, placed on his bedside table, vibrated brusquely, indicating that he'd just received a text message. He ceased his movements towards the bed and turned around to scoop it up from the table.

"Three unread messages!" He mumbled after glancing at the screen.

The first was an advertisement from the phone company, informing him about some brand-new service plans he could purchase. He, of course, ignored it and moved on to another message.

The second text message was from Camilla, inquiring about his day, his training, and if the two of them could meet the following day for lunch. She also indicated that she missed him greatly and would like to spend part of the weekend together.

"How thoughtful!!"

He couldn't help but smile as he read the message. Camilla seemed to have the best timing in the world, as far as he was concerned.

Whenever he had some free time and needed to tone down his training, she would be there to help him unwind. When he was busy with practice, like over the past few weeks, she would remain tactful and still be there for him in her own way without distracting him from his pursuits. She was the perfect partner — considerate, charming, and mature, without any clingy tendencies, unlike some other members of the fairer sex he'd been with during his previous life.

Zachary didn't lose a second before typing a few honeyed words in reply. He informed her about his circumstances, then professed that he missed her dearly and longed to hold her close. Then, as briefly as possible, he agreed to her suggestion of meeting up the following day for lunch before moving on to the third text message.

"Oh my God! Finally, this is it." Zachary couldn't help but yell out excitedly on reading the message.

The communication was from Norsk Toppfotball, the organization that governed Norwegian football, informing him that he'd just been named the best player of the 2013 Tippeligaen season. It also notified him that he would receive his golden boot and the league's best-player accolade just before the kick-off of the Norwegian Cup finals on Sunday.

Short, uncomplicated, and concise — that was the message. However, it transformed Zachary's night from black and white into a colored state with a high resolution.

He'd been waiting for the results of the best player list to come out so that he could reap the rewards of a pending system mission. And finally, just two days before the Norwegian Cup final, the results were out, flooding him with a sense of contentment.

"DING"

As if on cue, the system notification sounded for the first time in a long time the next instant.

"Congratulations," the AI's apathetic voice soon followed.

"The user has completed most of the required milestones of the system's 2013 Tippeligaen Serial Challenge successfully."

"The user can now view the mission completion details in the system interface."

"Does the user wish to view the details right now?"

Zachary's heart stirred with boundless delight on hearing the system's notification. He couldn't help but do a wiggle-wiggle, moving his entire body, from head to toe, there in his bedroom.

For the first time in almost a year, he was about to receive a substantial reward from the system. Of course, his spirits were flying high and almost soaring to the heavens. He couldn't remember the last time he was that excited.

"Does the user wish to view the mission completion details now?" The system AI's apathetic voice sounded within his mind again. It momentarily busted him out of his drunken state of delight and forced his thoughts back to the present.

"Positive," Zachary replied with zest before settling down on his bed and rubbing his hands together in anticipation. "Bring up the complete details of the mission and associated rewards right away."

"DING"

"Command received," the AI articulated.

"Mission details coming up on interface right away."

Chapter 272 - System Rewards, Once Again

"DING"

The familiar crystal-like display that was almost transparent manifested in front of him out of thin air the next moment. Within an instant, it became populated with the details of the just-completed 2013 Toppeligaen system mission.

"Excellent!"

Zachary blinked as his eyes adjusted to the lighting on the interface. Without further ado, he began to peruse through the details.

#5 new messages

CONGRATULATIONS

->You have completed the system mission (2013 Toppeligaen Serial Challenge) successfully.

->Mission Rewards

1) 7000 Juju-points

2) A-grade vitality-enhancing-elixir

->Mission Summary

*Milestone 1: Play 70% of the fixtures in the 2013 Tippeligaen season. The user must be part of the starting eleven or a playing substitute in at least 21 of the 30 matches of the 2013 Tippeligaen. {Milestone Not Achieved; Rating D}

*Milestone 2: Help your teammates become the champions of the 2013 Tippeligaen. {Milestone Achieved Successfully; Rating S+}

*Milestone 3: Provide the most assists in the 2013 Tippeligaen season. {The user was second on the list of assist providers in the league. Milestone Not Achieved, Rating B}

*Milestone 4: Become the top scorer of the 2013 Tippeligaen season. (The user was the top scorer of the league with 21 goals. Milestone Achieved Successfully; Rating S+)

*Milestone 5: Become the MVP of the 2013 Tippeligaen season. (Milestone Achieved Successfully; Rating S)

Overall Mission Rating: S

Bonus Rewards

You have earned 1000 Bonus Juju points.

"Oh, my goodness me!" Zachary hooted excitedly, despite himself. "Those are 8,000 Juju Points, plus an A-grade vitality-enhancing-elixir as rewards. With such a generous reward, I'll be able to raise my fitness to another level before next season for sure."

Zachary's hopes had already soared to another level after reading the mission completion message. With the mission reward of 8,000 Juju points, plus the 3,900 originally in his reserve, he possessed more than enough points to upgrade the system to the next level.

However, that was not what excited him the most. Instead, it was the A-graded vitality-enhancing-elixir that made his heart caper and threaten to jump out of his chest with agitation.

How could he not be excited after gaining such a reward!

The vitality-enhancing-elixir was the most miraculous of all panaceas Zachary had ever won from the system. Back when he'd just returned back to his past, it was a B-graded version of the elixir that had helped him heal his ankle injury and elevate his fitness significantly within a short time. Its effects were beyond divine for sure.

Moreover, it was the perfect reward, gained right at a precise time.

Zachary was sure that if he consumed an A-graded version of the elixir, his fitness would soar to unprecedented levels within days. Either his agility or his body control would shatter the bottleneck that'd been holding back his advancement before long. If he was lucky, he might even raise both attributes to that almost inhuman level of the S-grading within a short while.

Zachary's heart was agitated as various thoughts flashed through his mind. He was even starting to feel a bit feverish at that moment as the need to improve his abilities was weighing on him heavily. It almost prompted him to open the system shop immediately, to obtain the elixir, and then consume it right there and then.

However, he took a deep breath and stopped himself from following through with the act the next instant.

"System," he said, his eyes still glued to the contents of the crystal-like interface. "Are there any negative side effects of consuming the elixir?"

"Negative, in the long run," the AI replied almost immediately. "However, the user should note that consuming a high-grade vitality-enhancing-elixir will cause the body fitness to improve explosively at unprecedented rates within a short period. Thus, the user will need ample time to acclimatize to the changes brought about by the elixir and might even experience a dip in body control due to the rapid rate of improvement in the short run."

"Ohhh!" Zachary said, letting out another breath. "On estimate, how long would I need to acclimatize myself to my new attributes and perform as usual after ingesting the elixir?"

"The time varies from individual to individual and from circumstance to circumstance," the AI responded. "However, based on past data, the user might require about six to eight weeks to adapt to the new level of abilities brought about by the A-graded elixir."

"That long!" Zachary mumbled, sighing dispiritedly. "Is there a way we can shorten the time?"

"There is," the AI was quick to respond. "The user can wait and try consuming the A-graded vitality-enhancing-elixir together with an A-graded physical-conditioning-elixir when it becomes next available. The user will need only about a month to adapt under the effects of the two elixirs since they complement one another perfectly."

"A physical-conditioning-elixir!" Zachary mumbled, his mind falling into a moment of deliberation. "And about a month is still needed as the time of acclimatization even after consuming the two elixirs together!"

Zachary's eyes glimmered for a bit with both resolve and expectation. A three-month dosage of the physical-conditioning-elixir was one of the rewards for completing the system's 2013 Norwegian Cup Serial Challenge mission. As long as he could put up a good performance on Sunday afternoon and help his team win the final against Molde, he would stand a chance of becoming the MVP. Then, he would be able to win the elixir from the system without any hustle.

However, all that was a matter of a few days later. Zachary was a bit crestfallen since he couldn't enjoy the benefits of the elixir right away. What a bummer!?

"So, that means I can't utilize the elixir yet even if I'm to acquire the complementary physical-conditioning-elixir," he said, shaking his head. "The best course of action for me is to wait and consume the elixir during the Christmas break, right after the conclusion of the Europa League group matches. That's the only way I can prevent its effects from hindering my performance during the official competitive matches in the remaining days of November and the rest of December."

"Exactly," the system's AI's affirmed.

"Then, I'll wait," Zachary resolved, letting out a breath.

He relaxed since he could still consume the elixir before the upcoming season. If all went according to plan, he would be a more accomplished player with new abilities next year. There was simply no need to rush. He just had to wait, and what was his would become his in time.

After making the resolution, Zachary considered for a bit on whether to upgrade the system before deciding against it. He already had enough on his plate and needed the few Juju points in his reserve. So, he decided to wait and see whether he would be obtaining rewards from other system missions soon before thinking about the issue again.

"Time to sleep."

Without further ado, Zachary closed the system interface and jumped into bed with haste. Not long after, he descended into slumberland and slept like a log, oblivious to anything else around him.

Chapter 273 - Eve Of The Norwegian Cup Final

Zachary followed Coach Bjørn Peters' instructions and didn't exercise intensively for the next two days. He simply attended the Rosenborg team training sessions, which were mainly focused on instilling the tactics for the final into the players on Friday and Saturday. Aside from that, the young footballer didn't do much of anything else except go to the massage parlor, perform a couple of yoga routines, and

accompany Camilla to let off some steam. He was totally laid back, spending his hours at leisure until when Coach Johansen called for the pre-match tactical meeting on Saturday evening.

Zachary, of course, didn't waste time heading to the tactics room to attend the meeting in full spirits. The two days had allowed his muscles to recover perfectly and his mind to freshen up, leaving him in a state akin to riding the mist and flowing like the clouds. He was in tip-top shape and ready to do his utmost in the Norwegian Cup final the following day.

Coach Johansen walked to the front of the tactics room right after the players had taken their seats. For a few seconds, he stood there, sweeping his gaze around the players like a shepherd overlooking his flock. Unlike a few months prior, the tactician had a self-confident air about him, ostensibly as if everything around the room was under his control. Anyone, including Zachary, could tell that he'd already grown into a bold and self-assertive coach after winning his first trophy with Rosenborg a few weeks prior.

"Good evening to you all," he greeted the players with a smile after a short while.

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

"Welcome to yet another pre-match tactics meeting," the coach said, glancing around. "Tomorrow afternoon, we play Molde in the Norwegian Cup final. It's an important match for all of us since we're on the cusp of winning a double for this season. So, I expect all of you to give more than a hundred percent during the match tomorrow afternoon. Are you with me, guys?" He ended his speech with a bellow.

"Yes, coach," the players replied loudly and enthusiastically in chorus.

"Good." The coach nodded and walked towards the tactics board. "As usual, I won't waste time discussing the tactics in detail since we have already spent an entire fourteen days doing just that," he said. "I'll just name the squad for tomorrow and highlight a few things before sending you home for the night."

"So, first things first, the squad," the coach continued in a booming voice as he started to draw a formation on the tactics board. "In goal, we'll have Daniel ?rlund, our veteran keeper. In defense, we'll have Mikael Dorsin, Tore Reginiussen, Yerry Mina, and Eric Bailly."

"In defensive midfield, it will be Mike Jensen and Thomas Partey holding down the fort. In attacking midfield, it will be none other than Zachary Bemba. On the flanks, we'll have both Tobias Mikkelsen and John Chibuike driving the ball. And finally, Nicki Nielsen will be our point-man and only center-forward. That's it for the starting line-up."

"Moving on," the coach carried on. "On the bench, we'll have a total of seven players. They are Lund Hansen, William Troost-Ekong, Cristian Gamboa, Ole Seln?s, Jonas Svensson, Pal André Helland, and Paul Kasongo."

"Any questions concerning the squad?" The coach queried immediately after.

All the players, including the regulars like Zachary and Nicki, remained silent. Of course, no player would dare to question the squad named by the coach.

"I'm glad we're on the same page," the coach said with a smile. "Now, I'll summarize the tactics for the final. Be sure to listen extra carefully since it'll be the last time I'll be discussing the game plan in some detail. Okay?" He swept his gaze across the room once again.

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

"Good." Coach Johansen nodded, stroking his beard. "We'll still play with our usual 4-2-3-1 defensive formation, with four defenders, two holding midfielders, one attacking midfielder, two flank players, and one center-forward." He pointed at each position on the tactics board as he spoke.

"I expect each of the field players to play with lightning-fast reactions and creativity on the field of play. That is because we'll have to utilize high pressing tactics combined with both wing play and counterattacking strategies to overcome Molde in the final."

"Furthermore, team Molde is likely to utilize a similar formation as ours in the final. So, we'll have to remain tight in shape from minute one so that the Molde guys cannot break through us through the

middle. Our midfielders will have to constantly be on their toes, closing down spaces to make the shape work."

"Lastly, the defenders will have to play a very high backline and constantly lay offside traps to prevent the Molde midfielders from playing dangerous balls behind us. And that's how we seal off the Molde attackers and prevent them from threatening our goal throughout the ninety minutes of gameplay. Are we together, guys?"

"Yes, coach."

"Good," Coach Johansen said, nodding. "Finally, all I'm requesting from all our field players is to play as usual. You need to remain composed, when and when without the ball so that you can deal with unexpected situations that might arise during the heat of the match. And above all, you need to stay focused right from the first minute until the final whistle. If you do that, we'll surely win the match, hands down. Are we together, guys?" He ended his monologue with another fervid roar.

"Yes, coach," the players roared back in unison with the same level of passion.

"Good," the coach said, smiling. "As you all know, we'll play the final at the Ullevaal Stadion starting at 2:00 PM. So, we'll need to depart for Oslo early in the morning, at least by 9:00 AM, to be on the safe side. Thus, I expect all field players to gather at the parking lot here, at Lerkendal, by 7:50 AM. Otherwise, I wish all of you a good night."

"Goodnight, coach," the players replied.

At the same time, a similar meeting was ensuing far off in Molde in the tactics room of the Aker Stadion. But rather than be called a tactics meeting, it would have been best to describe it as a crisis meeting based on the mood in the tactics room at that moment. It was as if a series of inconspicuous but ominous sparks were darting across the brightly-lit room, bringing with them a drab and dreary atmosphere upon the people seated within.

The air was just that heavy, with every face in the tactics room occasionally contorting into a slight frown. It was as if the participants were deep in consternation, preparing to face off against a dreadful monster rather than team Rosenborg in a few hours.

"Tomorrow afternoon is our only chance at winning any silverware this season," Ole Gunnar Solskjaer, the head coach of Molde Fotballklubb, abruptly broke the silence.

His tone was somber as he swept his gaze across his players while folding his arms across his chest. A few almost imperceptible dark circles could be seen around his eyes — a tell-tale sign that he wasn't in the best of spirits at that moment.

"Let me repeat this again," the coach articulated word for word, taking a step forward. "Tomorrow afternoon is our only chance at winning any silverware this season. That is because we'll be facing off against Rosenborg in the Norwegian Cup final at the Ullevaal Stadion in Oslo. Should we win, we'll become the 2013 Norwegian Champions and then qualify for the Europa League qualifiers for next year." He paused for a few seconds as if to let his words first sink into the minds of his players.

"As long as we win, we'll wash away all our shame of finishing sixth in the Tippeligaen and once again establish ourselves as the giants of Norwegian football." The coach punctuated his words with a clap of his hands before sweeping his gaze across his players. "But that's as long as we win!"

"So, lads," he continued. "I expect you to give your all, to do your best and play like never before in tomorrow's final. I expect you to head into the match against Rosenborg as if your lives are solely dependent on the results of that match. And I expect you to remain more than a hundred percent focused from the first minute until the final whistle. For that's the only way we'll be able to outdo what's probably the mightiest squad in Norwegian football at the moment. Are we together, lads?"

"Yes, coach," all the players in the Aker Stadion's tactics room roared back enthusiastically in concert.

"Good, good, good!" Coach Ole Gunnar Solskjaer nodded, the corners of lips lifting into a faint smile. "I like the energy. And I hope you carry that energy into the finals tomorrow. As long as you do that and play at your best, then what's there to fear? We'll be able to give Rosenborg a run for their money for sure. Are you with me, lads?"

"Yes, coach."

"That's the spirit," Coach Ole Gunnar Solskjaer said, his voice lowering once again. "Now, let's discuss tactics." He turned around and stepped towards the large LCD screen in front of the room before turning it on.

"Tomorrow, we'll play with a 4-2-3-1 formation," he said and began pointing at the field positions, which were already manifesting on the LCD screen. "Our goal keeper will be ?rjan Nyland. Our four defenders will be Olav Rindar?y, Vegard Forren, Even Hovland, and Martin Linnes."

"Our two holding midfielders will be Magne Hoseth and Emmanuel Ekpo. Our only attacking midfielder will be Jo Inge Berget. Our flank players will be Daniel Chima Chukwu and Mattias Mostr?m, on the left and right, respectively. And finally, our center-forward will be Fredrik Gulbrandsen."

"On the bench, we'll have Ole S?derberg, Joona Toivio, Per-Egil Flo, Daniel Berg Hestad, Mats M?ller Daehli, Agnaldo, and Tommy H?iland. That's it for the squad."

"And now, I'll emphasize some of the key points within the tactics once again," he said, glancing around. "One, I expect each one of you except Fredrik, our center-forward, to fall back and defend whenever we lose the ball."

"You guys have to note that Rosenborg has a very agile attacking force and midfield. Players like Zachary Bemba, Nicki Nielsen, Tobias Mikkelsen, and Thomas Partey are all very terrifying opponents when given space and time on the field of play."

"The only way to prevent them from terrorizing our defense is by constantly closing them down and obstructing them long before they can step into our defensive third. And the only way to achieve that perfectly with our squad is by continuously playing with ten men behind the ball whenever we're on defense. Are you guys with me?"

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

"Good." The coach nodded. "Point number-two. I want our midfielders to prioritize that Zachary Bemba and bar him from stepping into the final third."

"This concerns especially our holding midfielders — Magne and Emmanuel. You guys will have to constantly be on your toes while marking him. Don't just let him run through our ranks as if we're just air. Show some spirit and use your brains. Tackle him, pull his shirt, or block him stealthily. I don't care how you do it. But make sure he doesn't run with the ball through the midfield and into our half. Are you with me?"

The coach's eyes glimmered as he glanced squarely at the two holding midfielders. However, the two players remained silent as if they were just pondering on the coach's words for a few moments.

"Are you with me, Magne, Emmanuel?" The coach asked once again after seeing them remain silent.

"Yes, coach," the two of them gave half-hearted replies as if they were not totally in agreement with the coach's instructions.

"If you have anything to say, just spit it out," Coach Ole said after noticing their hesitation.

"Coach," Emmanuel Ekpo, one of the holding midfielders, said a bit hesitantly in reply. "We're all well aware that Zachary Bemba has been a highly clinical and efficient set-piece taker throughout the season. As long as we concede a free-kick in our final third, he'll have a chance to punish us and score for sure. So, how can we still use fouls against him during the match? Isn't that just like shooting ourselves in the foot?"

"That's a good observation," Coach Ole said, a polite smile outlining his face. "But what I meant is for you guys to bar his path long before he steps into the final third. If the situation calls for it like during a dangerous counterattack, you can even stealthily pull at his shirt."

"Provided that he's still more than thirty-five yards from our goal and you aren't the last man, then that will be the proper way to handle the situation. That way, we can avoid conceding free kicks in dangerous positions in our final third and frustrate Zachary, thereby causing trouble for Rosenborg. Are you with me, Emmanuel?"

"Yes, coach," the holding midfielder replied, nodding.

"Good." Coach Ole nodded. "However, whatever the circumstance, you guys have to try as much as possible to avoid conceding free-kicks in the final third. If you are to foul, then go commit your fouls far away from the box so that you don't concede needless free-kicks. I want us to make it as hard as possible for that Zachary to net even a single goal. Are you with me, lads?"

"Yes, coach."

"Then, I'm glad," Coach Ole said, a light smile framing his features. "I'm sure that each one of you knows what to do tomorrow since we've been going through the tactics over the past two weeks. So, let's end today's meeting here. Make sure that you don't stay up late and be sure to be on time tomorrow. We'll depart for the airport at 10:00 AM sharp."

Chapter 274 - To The Ullevaal Stadion

It was just past noon, two hours to the much-anticipated Norwegian Cup Final. Nevertheless, the over-enthusiastic fans had long occupied every available seat in the Ullevaal Stadion in Oslo.

In their respective team colors, they sang and cheered at the top of their voices, chanting their team slogans at the top of their voices. They were overflowing with excitement and stewing in anticipation of the kick-off of the Norwegian Cup final.

In that boisterous crowd were two stunning girls with extraordinarily otherworldly charm and charisma. They were like a pair of phoenixes among domestic chickens to the point that all the male fans around couldn't help but keep on casting wolfish glances their way from time to time.

The two girls were clearly the center of attraction in that part of the stadium. However, they seemed not to mind the ravenous stares directed their way. Instead, they continued discussing the upcoming match as if oblivious to the peculiar atmosphere all around them.

They were, of course, Emily Anderson, Zachary's agent, and Kristin Stein, his publicity secretary. The two of them had arrived in Oslo the previous day with the intent of watching the final, live, at the Ullevaal Stadion. After spending the night at a comfy hotel, the two of them, like other fans, made their way to the stadium early in the morning. They had then joined in the pre-match excitement and were eagerly awaiting the kick-off.

"The fans are really passionate," Emily Anderson said to Kristin, who was seated beside her. "It's still two hours to kick-off, yet they are already chanting at the top of their voices like mad."

"That's nothing surprising," Kristin replied. "It's what you would expect when Rosenborg is about to face off against Molde in the Cup final. The majority of the Norwegian sporting community agrees that the two teams are the biggest powerhouses—the very top dogs in Norwegian Football. Only a few doubters still deny that fact. A meet-up between them will always attract an enormous crowd of rowdy football fans here in Norway. I'm sure that aside from the supporters in the stadium right now, there are many more waiting to watch the final on TV at home."

"Moreover," Kristin continued with a smile. "The Norwegian Cup is the oldest competition in Norway. So, it holds a special place in the hearts of Norwegian football fans. It is the winners of the Cup who'll earn the title Norwegian Football Champions rather than the Tippeligaen winners."

"Ohhh!" Emily exclaimed, taking the time to adjust her sunglasses on the bridge of her nose. "Then, if Molde wins, they'll become Norwegian Champions instead of Rosenborg. Is that right?"

"Yes, that's right," Kristin confirmed.

"What a weird football culture!" Emily said, shaking her head. "In England, for instance, it's the winners of the premier league that will earn the title — English Champions. I'm sure that it's the same in most other countries like Germany, Spain, and Italy. I wonder why you Norwegians decided to do things the other way around!"

Kristin suppressed a chuckle. "As I already said, the Norwegian Cup holds a special place in the hearts of the Norwegian football enthusiasts. That's why attendance is at full capacity now, even with two hours remaining to kick-off."

"Let's hope Zachary and his teammates emerge victoriously at the end of it all," Emily said, frowning slightly and glancing around. "It would be a bummer if Rosenborg ended such a great domestic campaign with a loss in the final."

"I think we have a great chance of winning," Kristin observed, her tone poised. "The whole team is in great shape. Confidence levels are high — at a level like never before since we just defeated Red Bull Salzburg 3:0. So, what's there to fear? What's stopping the team from crushing Molde?"

"You're right." Emily smiled. "It seems I'm just fretting over nothing. Let's hope everything goes well."

"There's no need to worry," Kristin emphasized. "With the way we've been playing over the past month, there's no way we should lose. Unless a higher power, higher than luck itself, is against us. Otherwise, we should easily hammer Molde 4:0."

Emily couldn't help but chuckle at that. "By the way," she said, her tone turning professional all of a sudden. "How is Zachary's social media presence these days?"

"Well," Kristin replied, creasing her brows a bit. "His accounts have exploded with followers over the past few weeks. There were hundreds of thousands of more followers, especially after Rosenborg won the league and after Zachary's latest performance in the Europa League. I can say with confidence that his accounts are doing pretty well."

Emily smiled on hearing that. She was thrilled that Zachary's popularity was skyrocketing. Fame and reputation equaled more endorsements, which translated into more money in the medium to long run. So, as an agent, she was ecstatic. But there was something, like a little bit of uncertainty, in Kristin's tone that nagged at her professional senses, which she felt she needed to address. So, she immediately inclined her head and glanced at the younger girl squarely.

"Why do I sense that there is a 'however' missing at the end of that statement of yours?" She pressed.

"It seems I can't hide anything from you," Kristin sighed. "Everything is fine with his publicity, except for one small issue. I don't know whether I should mention it or not."

"Ohhh!" Emily's heart stilled a bit. "In a business such as ours, there's no such thing as a small problem. There's either a problem or there isn't. It's as simple as that. So, what is it this time around?"

"As I said, it's just a small issue," Kristin said, shaking her head. "There were pictures of Zachary and an older woman that emerged on a few blogs about two weeks back. So, a few of his followers started trolling his social media accounts, asking about the pictures. Zachary, of course, didn't even consult me and replied with a single word — girlfriend. But that's when a few fans started criticizing his choice of ladies, saying that he needs to look for someone his age — someone who'll not distract him from his pursuits."

"You know Zachary's character," Kristin continued. "He, of course, ignored the fans and went back to his training as if he'd never made the post. So, the discussion grew bigger and bigger, to the point of involving the woman in the pictures. It was almost getting out of hand over the past few days until I blocked some troublesome followers. Only then did the activity on his accounts return to normal."

"Ohhh!" Emily's eyes widened with surprise after hearing the tale. "Why is it that I know nothing about this girlfriend of Zachary's?"

Kristin shrugged in response. "Most posts about her are either in Norwegian or German. So, that might be the reason you didn't catch wind of it."

"You're right." Emily nodded. "That might be the case. Do you have her picture? I would like to see this girlfriend of Zachary's. I hope she's not a troublemaker. Otherwise, we'll have plenty of problems in the near future."

"Just a minute," Kristin said, fishing her phone from her purse. Without further ado, she searched for a few of Camilla's photos on the web before immediately showing them to Emily.

"Isn't this the assistant of the marketing manager from Audi Norway?" Emily mumbled, creasing her brows, on seeing the photographs. "When did they get together?"

"I don't know." Kristin shrugged.

Emily nodded. "It's good you told me about this. Don't bother Zachary about this and definitely not about the followers trolling him. We can't afford to distract him at this critical juncture when he still has to play two Europa League group matches. Let him continue his training normally. I'll try to see if I can get some more information on what's happening from him in the next few days."

"Oh, okay," Kristin said. "Don't you want to find any more information about the lady in the pictures yourself? What if she has ill intentions towards Zachary?"

Emily couldn't help but sigh on hearing the question. "If I did that, I would be overstepping my boundaries. As his agent, I can only open his eyes to a few of the problems that may hinder his career."

But if an issue gets too personal, there's nothing I can do. But, don't worry. I'll see what I can do on my side, even if my hands are tied."

"Good," Kristin said, smiling and returning her attention to the pitch.

Zachary glanced skyward, trying to deduce the weather in his own way after exiting the team bus at the gates of the Ullevaal Stadion that afternoon. A soft smile outlined his face the next instant after noticing that the blue sky above the stadium was dotted with fluffy white clouds that drifted lazily in the gentle breeze. There were no signs of rain, so he relaxed even further.

"Zachary! Sign an autograph for me. Zachary, how do you feel about the match? Zachary..."

A few ardent yells broke him out of his moment of reverie. He glanced around and noticed that several fans in Rosenborg jerseys were fervently screaming his name. Some were even hopping up and down as they waved at him enthusiastically.

"Man, you sure are popular here in Norway," a familiar voice said from behind him. "The fans are always all over you everywhere you go to in Norway."

Zachary smiled on hearing that. He ignored Thomas Partey, who'd made the remark, and took the time to sign a few autographs for the fans.. After that, he followed his teammates into the stadium, feeling eager to unleash carnage on team Molde in the Norwegian Cup final.

Chapter 275 - Awards And An Unexpected Situation

Zachary could clearly hear the cheering from the stands in the Ullevaal Stadion hitting a thunderous crescendo when he marched onto the playing field together with the other players and match officials that afternoon. On looking around, he found the stadium's atmosphere already boiling hot with wild and crazy fans dancing and singing. It was simply madness — but a madness which roused him. He could feel his heart beating faster in anticipation of the final.

"Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen!"

The mellifluous voice of Kjell Roar, the commentator, sounded abruptly. The sound from the stadium's speakers was so loud that it smothered out all the cheering that had been underscoring the entire stadium.

"Let me take this opportunity to welcome you all to the finals of the 2013 Norwegian Football Cup," the voice continued. "I'm excited since Rosenborg Ballklub is about to face off against Molde Fotballklubb in what will be the climax of the Norwegian football season. I'm sure all of you are aware that the match-winner will earn the title of Norwegian Champions, while the loser will — well, only go home crying. Will it be team Rosenborg who'll come out on top, or will it be team Molde that will have the last laugh? We shall have an answer before sunset today."

"But first things first, introductions," the commentator continued in a booming voice. "I'm Kjell Roar, your faithful commentator for this match, and here with me are two pundits. One is Sigurd Rushfeldt, a former Rosenborg player who was a prolific goalscorer during his time. For those not in the know, Sigurd didn't just play for Rosenborg but also for several other teams around Europe, including Birmingham City and Austria Wien. It's a pleasure to have you here for this match, Sigurd."

"Thank you, Kjell," Sigurd Rushfeldt, the first pundit, replied. "It's also a pleasure to be here and provide the on-pitch analysis for such a great match between two great teams in Norwegian football. Thanks for having me, Kjell."

"You're welcome, Sigurd," Kjell Roar replied politely. "Moving on, our second pundit for today is none other than Ulrich Møller, a player who spent his entire senior career at Molde. It's a pleasure to have you here, Ulrich!"

"Thank you," Ulrich Møller, the second pundit, replied. "I'm also glad to be here. Thank you for inviting me, Kjell."

"You're welcome." Kjell Roar replied with a chuckle. "Okay, that marks the end of the introductions. So, without wasting time, let's take you to the action on the field."

"The teams have just completed their customary handshake, and the players are ready to take their positions on the field of play. But, we'll have to delay the discussions about the upcoming match because of a small award ceremony right before kick-off. Word going around is that Zachary Bemba, Rosenborg's young number-33, will be receiving his golden boot and MVP award for the 2013 Tippeligaen right before kick-off. So, let's put our hands together to welcome the one and only, Zachary Bemba, to the podium."

Zachary could feel another wave of thunderous cheers sweeping across the entire stadium after the announcement. The crowd's thrill even rose further, to the point of insanity, when he walked up to the makeshift podium to receive his two accolades from the Norsk Toppfotball official.

Those cheers caused his spirits to soar higher and provoked a toothy grin. When he finally held both the golden boot and bronze statuette within his hands, he felt like he was walking on clouds. He was ecstatic since he'd just won two prestigious football awards in his first season as a pro footballer.

Nonetheless, Zachary didn't let the excitement disrupt his focus on the upcoming match. Instead, he shut out everything until his mind was as clear and calm as a pool of water. After that, he handed his golden boot and bronze statuette to one of Rosenborg's coaching assistants for safekeeping before returning to his position on the pitch to wait for the kick-off whistle.

FWEEEEEEE

Coach Ole Gunnar Solskjaer could feel his heart racing with a mixture of both anxiety and anticipation when the referee blew the whistle at exactly 2:00 PM that afternoon. He understood that he could only have something to show for the season and soothe the anguish of the Molde fans by winning the Norwegian Cup final. Otherwise, he would have to bear the shame of finishing sixth in the domestic league and even face the possibility of losing his job. Things were tough, and even the fact that he was a Molde legend couldn't help his case.

He felt tense as he watched his players kick off the final against Rosenborg on the back foot. The performance of his players in the first fifteen minutes of gameplay couldn't soothe his jittery nerves in the slightest. He would even occasionally shudder despite himself, especially when the resourceful Rosenborg attackers unleashed dangerous shots towards Molde's goal. However, as an experienced coach, he soon forced himself to remain composed and continue watching the game despite the circumstances on the field of play.

But, focusing on the game let him witness in great detail how Rosenborg kept suppressing his team as if his players were a bunch of nobodies. In just a couple of minutes, he couldn't take it anymore. So, he rose from the bench like an angry mother hen and started giving some tough love to his players from the sidelines.

"Lads," he yelled at the top of his voice, pacing the entire length of the technical area. "What the f*ck are you doing on the pitch? We already agreed that you have to close down the spaces in the middle as quickly as possible whenever we're without possession. But what have you been doing ever since the start of the match? Even a bunch of old ladies can play better football than you. Aren't you ashamed? And can't you be a little bit more proactive and play like people who wish to win the final?" He punctuated his words with a rhythmic clapping of his hands, probably to motivate his players.

"Emmanuel and Magne!" The Molde coach continued roaring out words at the pace of a machine gun as he waved his hands up in the air. "Make sure that you mark Zachary, and don't allow him even an inch of space in the middle. Guard him tightly and stop him from unleashing those troublesome lofted passes behind our defensive line. And above all, everyone else should stay focused and work hard to win possession back as soon as possible. Use counter-pressing tactics, if need be. But don't let Rosenborg play us like we're nonexistent." He concluded his little speech with another thunderous clap before settling back down on the bench.

However, his face couldn't help but morph into a frown a few minutes later. His words seemed to have fallen on deaf ears, and his players couldn't just grow into the game quickly enough. They were like a group of toddlers playing in a laid-back manner. They didn't possess any bit of class or character to the point of failing to sustain even the slightest pressure on Rosenborg's defense for almost the entire first half. Anyone, including the fans, could tell that they were in a sorry state — a fact that caused Coach Ole Gunnar Solskjaer an immense amount of headache.

However, just as he was despairing, his team got an opportunity to counterattack in the 40th minute. It was one of those rare chances that came out of the blue.

Nicki Nielsen, Rosenborg's center-forward, had just unleashed a missile on goal after receiving a well-timed pass from Zachary Bemba. However, the lucky stars of Rosenborg seemed not to be well-aligned that day, and ?rjan Nyland, the Molde keeper, managed to snatch the ball out of the air to make an incredible save. And without any dilly-dallying, the keeper kicked the ball high and far—towards Fredrik Gulbrandsen, the Molde center-forward on the other side of the pitch. With that lightning-fast long pass from the keeper, a rare Molde counterattack was then on.

Coach Ole abruptly rose from his seat as his heart raced with anticipation. He watched with bated breath as Fredrik Gulbrandsen, his center-forward, controlled the ball with his chest at the border of the final third. And without losing a moment, the striker deftly stepped past Yerry Mina, Rosenborg's center-back, and was soon off towards Rosenborg's goal like a whirlwind. He moved fast enough to rush through Rosenborg's defense in a matter of seconds. And soon, the long-awaited moment of truth came

for team Molde as the striker faced off against the last two defenders between him and Rosenberg's goal.

Coach Ole felt strained with nervous tension as he watched the striker do the unexpected. He didn't just try to dribble past the last two defenders as most clinical forwards would do — but unleashed a long-range shot from the edge of the 18-yard box after ending his run. Was he crazy or blindly self-confident? Coach Ole would know the answer in a few seconds.

He unconsciously balled his fists as he watched the shot squeeze past the two Rosenberg defenders in the box and then grazed off the post before homing into the back of the net.

"What a counter!"

Coach Ole shouted excitedly and punched the air repeatedly the next moment. He could hardly believe that his team, which had been struggling from the very first minute, had drawn first blood after a rare counterattacking opportunity. From the keeper to the striker, it was just a single long-range pass — and boom, the ball was in the back of the net before the Rosenberg players could react.

Chapter 276 - Magical Touches I

Rosenborg 0: Molde Fotballklubb 1

Kristin sighed despite herself after taking a glance at the stadium's jumbotron. She was a bundle of nerves since she couldn't come to terms with the quick change of the situation on the field of play. Her team had been dominating proceedings, unleashing relentless waves of attacks on Molde's box from the very first minute. However, out of the blue, the opponents had obtained a single opportunity late in the first half and converted it. As a result, team Molde was leading 1:0, with just four minutes remaining to half time. It was really a bummer.

"Well, that was unexpected," Kristin heard Kjell Roar, the commentator, yell out loud after the goal celebrations. "Fredrik Gulbrandsen, Molde's center-forward, has managed to put the ball into the back of the net with a single attempt on goal. It's now Rosenberg 0, and Molde 1. Ulrich! What's your take on the match so far?"

"Well," Ulrich Møller, one of the pundits for the day, said. "Even as a Molde supporter, I still have to commend Rosenborg's efforts during the first half. The Rosenborg players have been phenomenal from the first minute in this final. They have been brilliant on all fronts, whether defensively or moving forward, and managed to create a lot of half-chances."

"However, football is a game that requires results, not half-chances," the pundit continued. "In this aspect, it's team Molde that has been the better team since Ole's men have managed to draw first blood in this highly contested final. With a single counter-attack, they have put one past Rosenborg. They're now in a very advantageous position to win the Norwegian Cup final. That's the importance of results."

"Thanks for your input, Ulrich," Kjell Roar chipped in. "What about you, Sigurd? What's your take on the match? Do you see Ole Gunnar Solskjaer's men holding on and going on to win this final?"

"Absolutely not," Sigurd Rushfeldt, the other pundit, was quick to reply in a confident tone. "The situation on the pitch is clear as day. The Troll Kids have outplayed Ole's men from the very first minute by showing class and character whenever they're on the ball. They've been so focused that we can literally feel their hunger for goals as they move the ball around the pitch. So, I believe we'll see a goal from one of the Rosenborg attackers in a few minutes at most."

"You're that confident!" Ulrich, the other pundit, chimed in.

"Of course, I'm confident," Sigurd replied. "You guys should not forget that Rosenborg's attacking force includes Zachary, Nicki, Tobias, and John Chibuike. Those guys will not go down that easily. They will most likely put two goals in the back of the net before we get to hear the final whistle. So, unless Ole's men can score three or more goals and defend like never before, I don't see them having a chance to win this final."

"Hehehe!" Kjell Roar chuckled. "Thanks for your input, Sigurd. But for now, let's get back to the action on the pitch. The match has just restarted after the goal celebrations. However, team Rosenborg has already won a throw-in close to the center-line on the left flank."

Zachary was very focused as he watched Mikael Dorsin, Rosenborg's left-back, prepare to take the throw-in on the left flank. His mind was calm despite his team, Rosenborg, trailing Molde by a goal to nil. Not even the loud cheers of the Molde fans could disturb his state of mind at that moment since he was confident in his team's abilities. He was sure Rosenborg would get back on level terms sooner rather than later. As long as his teammates put in a little more effort, they would be able to put the ball in the back of the net in the following few minutes.

FWEEEEEEE

The referee blew the whistle at that moment and signaled for Mikael Dorsin to take the throw-in quickly. Mikael didn't dare to dilly-dally any longer. He made a short run towards the touchline as he readied himself to make a two-handed throw into the pitch.

"Mikael, here!"

Zachary shouted and moved like a thunderclap on seeing Mikael make it to the touchline. With the agility of a wild cat, he stepped away from Emmanuel Ekpo, the Molde midfielder that had been marking him for a large part of the first half. In a matter of seconds, he was rushing into space—towards the touchline while anticipating the throw-in ball from Mikael.

Mikael Dorsin, the veteran Rosenborg player, didn't disappoint. The left-back reacted quickly and threw the ball into the path of Zachary just as he'd stepped away from his mark.

"Brilliant!"

Zachary couldn't help but smile as he received the well-timed throw-in. He didn't lose a moment as he leaped high and chested the ball down to the green while also taking a moment to assess the situation around him with his peripheral vision.

A slight shudder ran along his spine when he noticed Emmanuel Ekpo, one of Molde's defensive midfielders, closing in on him quickly like a raging bull. However, he suppressed the discomfort the next instant and flicked the ball to his left boot, further away from the opponent. He remained patient and calm for a few seconds until the approaching Emmanuel Ekpo was just a meter away from his position before taking further action.

No-look pass!

While looking the other way, he flicked the ball back to Mikael Dorsin on the touchline before rushing past the approaching Emmanuel Ekpo like the embodiment of speed itself. He then received a return pass from Mikael and was soon on his way towards Molde's half like a whirlwind.

However, he had to slow down a moment later since he realized he was just about to run into yet another Molde player. It was Magne Hoseth, the other holding midfielder, barring his path towards the other side of the pitch that time around.

Zachary didn't bother to rush past the midfielder since he knew that would be unwise. He'd already taken in the situation ahead and noticed that several Molde players had already packed themselves before their defensive third. So, even if he managed to beat the opponent before him, he would just run into another and end up losing the ball before threatening Molde's defense.

So, he flicked the ball to his right, pushing it towards the middle of the pitch with a couple of deft touches to step further away from the approaching opponent. He then showcased his skills as a true Maestro and unleashed a long-range raking pass towards the right-wing with the outer area of his boot.. Before the approaching Magne Hoseth could close him down, he'd already sent the ball flying towards Tobias Mikkelsen like a laser-guided missile.

Chapter 277 - Magical Touches II

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

A wave of thunderous cheers resounded across the entire Ullevaal Stadium when Tobias Mikkelsen, Rosenborg's right-winger, chested down Zachary's pinpoint pass. The noise around the stands continued increasing until it was almost unbearable.

That was when the winger turned around with the ball hooked to his foot. Before long, he was darting across the touchline and spearing into Molde's half amid rising cheers.

Knut Olav Rindarøy, Molde's left-back, soon came rushing forward to intercept Tobias' run. However, the speedy Rosenborg winger didn't try to take on his new opponent. He just flicked the ball to Thomas Partey, Rosenborg's defensive midfielder, who was running in sync with him through the middle.

Without losing a moment, the agile winger stepped past the Molde left-back before receiving a return pass from Thomas Partey. In a matter of seconds, he was rushing along the touchline once again, long before any other opponent could intercept him.

Zachary's heart stirred with anticipation as he watched the winger skip past a few other opponents before ending his run with a teasing cross into Molde's box. It was the moment of truth, and Zachary kept his eyes trailed on the ball as he, too, raced towards the Molde's goal with all the haste he could muster.

He didn't slow down even as the ball started descending into the box. He even continued running as he watched Nicki Nielsen, Rosenborg's ever-reliable forward, jump high and plant a header towards goal from around the edge of the 18-yard box.

It was then that he felt a momentary silence descend upon the entire stadium as Nicki Nielsen's header flashed towards the top right corner like a bullet. He was almost halting his run, thinking that Nicki Nielsen had scored. But then, at the last moment, he saw the keeper leap high and push the ball slightly off its course with his outstretched fingertips.

"BANG!"

The sound of the ball smashing off the crossbar resounded across the then almost silent stadium, inducing another wave of frustration among the Rosenborg players. In the 44th minute, they had failed to convert yet another chance and bring proceedings back to a leveled ground.

"Shit! What bad luck we've had during this match!" Zachary couldn't help but curse under his breath as he increased his speed towards Molde's goal once again.

Although he was very frustrated at the missed opportunity, he hadn't given up on scoring before halftime. He knew that there was still a chance to turn things around as long as the Molde defenders failed to clear the ball in time.

"Nicki!" He yelled at the top of his voice without reducing his speed. "Go after the ball."

It was as if the sound of Zachary's voice had woken up Nicki from his frustration. The center-forward reacted immediately and raced towards the direction of the slowly descending ball like a flash.

However, he didn't manage to make it since Even Hovland, Molde's center-back, was a step ahead of him. The center-back had reacted promptly to avert the danger with a well-timed back volley before Nicki could close him down.

"There's still a chance."

Zachary slowed down and adjusted his course after noticing the defender clear the ball. With his high game intelligence, graded at A by the system, he could already deduce that the ball wouldn't travel far from the box. It would most likely land towards the border of the final third. Zachary was hopeful he could get to it before the opponents.

"Clear!!! Don't allow that Zachary to get to the ball."

He could hear the booming voice of someone, probably the Molde coach, roaring out commands as he inched closer to the ball. But that didn't slow down his actions in the slightest. He managed to get to the position of the descending ball quickly by relying on his long strides. Without losing a moment, he brought it under control before turning around to face Molde's goal.

He could already feel adrenaline pumping into his system since he was eager to help his team equalize before halftime. However, just as he was about to take the first step towards Molde's box, he noticed a sliding tackle approaching his foot, as sudden as a slippery snake in the grass. It seemed one of the Molde defenders had decided to risk bringing him down rather than allowing him into the box.

Zachary had no intention of dancing to the opponent's tune. He dug his boot under the ball and lifted it off the ground slightly to escape the sliding tackle by mere centimeters. Before the tackling defender could react, he was already an arm's length away, his strides eating up yards of space like there wasn't a tomorrow.

However, he had to slow down again a moment later after running into another obstacle in the form of Vegard Forren, the second Molde center-back.

The defender was quite clever in his approach. He had angled his body in such a way as to force Zachary towards the flanks as he waited for his colleagues to catch up and help him deal with the danger.

However, Zachary wasn't going to wait around for the Molde defense to shape up. He stepped on the ball and dragged it back slightly with his left foot before following that up with a 180 degrees spin around the defender to complete a Marseille Turn. By the time the defender realized what was happening, Zachary had caught the ball with his other foot and rolled it behind and away. Without losing a moment, he then continued his run towards Molde's box like a thunderclap amid a wave of thunderous cheers.

Zachary's mind was working in overdrive as his strides consumed yards of space in a matter of seconds. He was already in the zone. His superb awareness could deduce all the dangers around him. Be it the two defenders blocking his path towards the box or the midfielder trying to pull his shirt from the back — he could see them all clearly. So, he made a prompt decision to shoot from outside of the box instead of taking on the defense.

"Here goes nothing."

Without losing a moment, Zachary flicked the ball to his right foot and pushed it further away from himself before the opponents could catch up to him. He then drew his leg back like a bowstring and swung down hard, slicing the ball on one side with the inside of his boot.

"BANG"

He couldn't help but let out a breath as he heard the clearly audible sound of his boot making contact with the ball. Without delay, he lifted his head and saw the ball spinning around the defense and flashing towards the goal like a rocket.

Perjan Nyland, the Molde keeper, reacted immediately and tried to block the shot with a despairing dive. However, his efforts were fruitless. The ball just whirled past his outstretched fingertips and homed into the back of the net.

Coach Johansen was all smiles as he watched the Rosenborg players celebrating the goal. His heart was still palpitating from the memory of how Zachary had handled himself right before scoring. With a few deft touches, the young midfielder had created something out of nothing, jumping over a sliding tackle and then executing a Marseille turn before chipping the ball into the back of the net. His control, movements, and vision had all been flawless and immaculate in those few moments.

Moreover, Zachary had made his actions look so simple to the point of giving the illusion that anyone could perform them. However, as a professional, Coach Johansen was sure that not many pro players active in the world could have handled themselves better than Zachary during such a crucial moment of the match. It was only thanks to the boy's high game intelligence, coupled with solid skills honed over thousands of practice sessions, that he managed to perform at such a level. The young midfielder was that impressive.

FWEEEEEEE

The referee blew the halftime whistle shortly after, bringing the proceedings on the field of play to a brief pause. Without dilly-dallying, the players of both teams rushed towards the tunnel for the halftime break.

"Let's head to the dressing room," Coach Johansen said to his team of coaching assistants. "We still have to prep the players for the second half." He added before turning around and leading the way towards the tunnel entrance.

His footsteps felt lighter since he was in a good mood. The ending of the first half had really relieved him of all the tension that had been accumulating within him ever since he'd stepped into the Ullevaal Stadion for the final. There had been some ups and downs, sure, but his players had managed to recover right before the halftime whistle. They'd bagged an equalizer and brought proceedings back to level terms in the 45th minute, causing his mood to lift.

Be that as it may, he was well aware that the match was far from over. There were still 45 minutes left to play before the conclusion of the proceedings. Should his players mess up and concede again, they would find themselves hard-pressed to win the game and go home with the trophy at the end of the day. Thus, he knew he needed to do his utmost to motivate them and straighten their attitude during the halftime break. He had to do his best to smother out any possibility of a field player committing a mistake when the trophy was in sight. It was his time to do his part as the head coach.

"Can I have everyone's attention?" The coach said in a commanding tone right after he'd stepped into the dressing room. "We only have 15 minutes to the commencement of the second half. So, let's utilize the time wisely."

The players were quick to respond on hearing Coach Johansen's voice. They paused all their chattering as quickly as possible and settled down on benches around the dressing room. In only a matter of seconds, they'd transformed from a group of rowdy athletes to the semblance of a class of A-graded students in a top academic institution.

Coach Johansen nodded to himself after witnessing their disciplined actions. "Let me start by saying that that was a good first half despite the score," he said with the intent to break the ice in the dressing room. "All of you were phenomenal both in defense and attack. You also executed the game plan quite perfectly, and that's why we've continued dictating the tempo throughout the entire first half."

The coach took a few steps forward before continuing in a somber tone. "But there are a few issues here and there that we need to address before we head into the second half. For instance, we shouldn't have conceded that goal on the counterattack if everyone on the team had played their roles perfectly. I can assure you that if six of our field players had reacted immediately and fallen back to defend, we would have prevented Molde from scoring. But we let our guard for just a moment, and because of that — we're still at square one during the halftime break."

"I'm not here to carry out a postmortem or cry over spilled milk," the coach continued. "But I have to warn you that we can't repeat the same mistake. We can't let our guard down during the second half, not even for a couple of seconds. We've got to remain focused for every minute of the gameplay and ensure that we don't commit basic mistakes that might push us into a dire situation. As long as we avoid being lax on the field of play, I'm sure we'll win this game and become champions today. Are we together, guys?"

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

Coach Johansen nodded, smiling. "I'm glad we're on the same page. Avoiding mistakes aside, I want us to be more daring and clinical while attacking. Forwards and midfielders! I want you to keep making goal attempts whenever you get the opportunity. When you have a clear visual, unleash a shot, and maybe you'll score. If there's an obstacle stopping you from shooting, pass to one of your teammates and then move forward. I want us to sustain our momentum and constantly oppress Molde's defense from the very first minute of the first half until the final whistle. That's the only way we'll win the final and become champions today afternoon. Are we together, guys?"

"Yes, coach."

"Good," Coach Johansen said, glancing at his watch. "It's almost time. So, all of you should prepare quickly before returning to the pitch. Those who would like to go to the washrooms should go. Those who need to see the medics should see them. I don't want any of you to have excuses for losing focus during the second half. Are we together?"

"Yes, coach."

"Okay, then." Coach Johansen said, nodding. "I wish you all the best of luck during the second half. And may we become champions today. For we're ROSENBORGGG!!!" He ended his speech with a cheer.

The players responded by roaring out Rosenborg chants in preparation for their return to the field. They all seemed eager to unleash carnage on team Molde during the second half.

"Do you still believe we'll win?" Emily asked, trying her best to make herself heard over the din in the stadium. She understood that football was unpredictable. Throughout history, weaker teams, including Greece and Senegal, had at one time overcome football giants in crucial competitions. She was worried that Molde would pull off the same thing and defeat Rosenborg just by relying on their team spirit.

"You don't need to worry," Kristin, who was seated beside her, replied, frowning. "Have you forgotten that Zachary is among the Rosenborg attackers? As long as he remains in good shape for the rest of the match, we'll surely score another two or three goals. You've got to believe in him since he's your client."

"You're right," Emily said, a soft smile outlining her face. "I guess I'm just nervous since this is a very crucial match for Zachary. I want him to perform and dazzle everyone present today."

"Why is it a very crucial match?" Kristin pressed, creasing her brows.

"I can't say at the moment," Emily replied, smiling mysteriously. "But if everything goes well, you'll know by the end of the week."

"Why all the secrecy?" Kristin grumbled but turned her attention back towards the pitch. She could already see the players of both teams coming out of the tunnel for the second half.

The game restarted, and the Rosenborg players resumed their relentless attacks on team Molde from the first minute of the second half. For the umpteenth time that afternoon, Coach Ole Gunnar Solskjaer was at the end of his wits as he followed the game from the sidelines. He could tell that Rosenborg was a much stronger side in all aspects of the modern game when compared to his team.

The overall framework of Rosenborg's attacking system was well-organized and pleasing to the eyes — a testament to the tactical prowess of Coach Johansen. The whole team moved together like a pack of wolves, both on the attack and defense. Additionally, their positioning at every moment of the game was textbook perfect, with players covering each other to prevent Molde from launching another counterattack. As a result, his players had failed to mount any meaningful attacks on Rosenborg's goal, even as the game approached the 60th minute.

"What to do?"

Coach Ole could see no hope for his team to win the final if the status-quo remained unchanged. It was only a matter of time before Rosenborg scored again if he left things the way they were. So, he made a prompt decision to bolster his defense by introducing a couple of defenders into the game there and then. That would make it harder for Rosenborg to score another goal and possibly push the game to the penalty shootout.

However, just as he was about to instruct his assistants to prep the substitutes, he stopped suddenly. That was because Zachary Bemba, Rosenborg's 18-year-old midfielder, had just made another run along the touchline on the left flank and was quickly spearing into Molde's half at breakneck speed.

The prodigy was as agile as a slippery snake in the jungle, weaving through the ranks of Molde players like they were a bunch of nobodies. Before the Molde players could array themselves into a proper defensive shape, he had already started cutting into the pitch from the left flank like a whirlwind.

Coach Ole was really frustrated. "What the f*ck are you guys doing?" He roared out loud as he ran towards the boundary of the technical area. "Hurry up and stop him before he makes it to our box? Do you need me to teach you the basics of defending during a final of a major competition?"

His words seemed to have woken up the Molde defenders from a long period of slumber. Without further ado, most of them rushed towards Zachary like a pack of predators that had just spotted their favorite prey.

Coach Ole could only shake his head in dismay after noticing the actions of his players. Most of them had rushed towards Zachary and left a big gap behind on the opposite flank. The defense was tilting to one side, meaning that the other Rosenborg attackers could exploit the opening on the right. Coach Ole could only pray and hope that the Rosenborg players wouldn't notice the defensive mistake. Otherwise, his team would be in big trouble.

However, the goddess of luck seemed hell-bent on making a joke out of team Molde that afternoon. What the coach was most afraid of transpired the very next instant. Zachary Bemba skipped past yet another Molde defender with a deft couple of touches before looking up and unleashing a teasing cross into space behind the defense.

"Damn!"

Coach Ole could only manage a curse as he watched Nicki Nielsen, Rosenborg's center-forward, pounce on Zachary's pinpoint cross around the edge of the 18-yard box. Before the confused Molde defenders could register what was transpiring, the center-forward chested the ball towards the green and then unleashed a carpet-shot towards the inside of the right post. And, before Coach Ole could even blink, the ball was already nestled in the back of the net.

What a nightmare!!

In the 62nd minute, Rosenborg had managed to score again and take the lead for the first time that afternoon. The score was Rosenborg Ballklub 2 and Molde Fotballklubb 1. Coach Ole could only place his hands on the back of his head as he watched the opponents celebrate the goal close to the corner flag.

A wave of euphoria washed across the stadium like a Tsunami when Nicki Nielsen scored Rosenborg's second goal. Kristin even noticed some Rosenborg fans taking off their shirts in the heat of the excitement. Unbothered by the cold, they continued waving their shirts in the air, chanting the Rosenborg victory slogans at the top of their voices. The atmosphere was crazy around the stands occupied by Rosenborg supporters.

"The situation remains the same as we head into the last twenty-five minutes of this exciting final," Kristin heard the commentator yell out loud a few minutes later. "Rosenborg Ballklub is still reigning supreme and sustaining a constant barrage of attacks on Molde's goal. As a result, Ole Gunnar Solskjaer's men have barely gotten opportunities to mount attacks of significance on Rosenborg's goal. What a final! The situation on the pitch is truly unprecedented, considering the history between the two clubs."

"My thoughts exactly," Sigurd Rushfeldt, one of the pundits for the day, chipped in. "It's the first time that we get to see Rosenborg overwhelming Molde in such a ruthless manner for as long as I can remember. We didn't get to see such a display of Rosenborg against Molde even during Coach Nils Arne Eggen's time. It's truly unprecedented."

Kjell Roar suppressed a chuckle. "A few minutes back, when I watched Rosenborg passing the ball around the pitch, I got the misconception that it was Barca rather than a Norwegian side on the field. The way they're executing the Tiki-taka style and passing the ball to hoard all the possession reminds me of the Spanish giants at their best. Their ball possession statistic should be over 70% at the moment. What a phenomenal side!"

"Indeed, what a phenomenal Rosenborg side!" Ulrich Møller, the second pundit, chipped in. "Even though I'm a Molde fan, I still have to applaud the brilliance of the Rosenborg players in this final. The way they're moving the ball around and how they're shaping up on the pitch is incredible. They have the makings of a great team that will easily bat heads with the football giants all over Europe and still put up a good display in the near future. I'm now really looking forward to their next few performances in the Europa League."

"Ulrich!" Kjell Roar, the commentator, interjected. "I'm glad that you've mentioned the point about Rosenborg having the makings of a great team. But what could have enabled Rosenborg to raise their performance to this unprecedented level in only a period of a few months? Do you think it's their new coach, Boyd Johansen? Or is it their young star midfielder, Zachary Bemba, carrying them forward?"

"Well," Ulrich Møller replied after clearing his throat. "That seems like a simple question. But, the answer is not as straightforward as you think. Zachary and the new coach aside, there has been a major change in the way Rosenborg does things over the past year."

"First and foremost," the pundit continued. "Rosenborg brought in a few crucial signings in the mid-season transfer window. Three of those signings, namely: Thomas Partey, Yerry Mina, and Eric Bailly, have been phenomenal in all matches they've played since arriving at Rosenborg. As I speak now, they continue to impress even during today's final. So, I believe they've also contributed to the shift in Rosenborg's playing style over the past few months."

"Ulrich is right," Sigurd Rushfeldt, the other pundit, chipped in with a chuckle. "By now, I believe that there's no one that should have any doubts about the capabilities of either Coach Johansen or Zachary. Their efforts have been quite vital in driving Rosenborg's forward to their current level of success."

"But that aside," the pundit continued. "The new signings have also been incredible in defense. They've created a favorable atmosphere on the team by allowing the rest to focus on their own tasks without any distractions. Nowadays, the Rosenborg attackers, including Zachary, can always attack without worry because of the exceptional defensive efforts of the new signings."

"Thank you, both Sigurd and Ulrich, for your input," Kjell Roar, the commentator, interjected before the pundits could carry on with the discussion. "Let's direct our attention back to the field of play where Nicki Nielsen, the Rosenborg center-forward, has just won a free-kick right in front of the arc of the 18-yard box. It's an opportunity for Rosenborg to double their lead as we head into the 70th minute of the Norwegian Cup final for sure. However, the bad news is that Nicki Nielsen seems hurt and is still rolling on the ground in pain as he awaits medical attention."

"It would really be bad for Rosenborg to lose Nicki Nielsen to an injury at this stage," Sigurd Rushfeldt chimed in with an audible sigh. "However, the Troll Kids can easily turn this disadvantageous situation into the third goal since Zachary is present on the pitch."

"Football is an unpredictable game," Ulrich Møller, the other pundit, said. "Even world-class free-kick takers, like Juninho, Messi, David Beckham, and Pirlo, have a conversion rate of less than 25%. So, we can't be sure that Zachary will score this free-kick."

"For your information, Zachary has maintained a conversion rate of over 80% since turning pro," Sigurd Rushfeldt responded in a comical tone. "So, how can you compare him with people who only have a conversion rate of around 20% a season?"

Ulrich, of course, wasn't going to be outdone. "Your ignorance knows no bounds," he said, mimicking the other pundit's tone. "The conversion rate of those players was calculated from hundreds of their attempts when taking free kicks in internationally renowned tournaments. But how many free-kicks has our boy, Zachary, taken this season? If my memory is not failing me, they should be less than a dozen set pieces. So, unless he can maintain his conversion rate over the next four to five years, he shouldn't be mentioned in the same leagues as the best free-kick takers in the world today."

"Hehehe," Kjell Roar chuckled. "That's a good discussion you two are having. However, let's return our attention to the pitch where Zachary is preparing to take the free kick."

Olav Brusveen, the TV2 Sportskanalen reporter, was following the proceedings on the field of play from the area designated for the press near the tunnel entrance. He'd shut out all the rumblings of the noisy commentators as he watched Zachary prepare to take the set-piece which could potentially win the final for Rosenborg.

It was the moment of truth, the time for the young player to prove that he could maintain his composure and perform as usual even at a crucial moment of a final. Should Zachary score the free-kick, he would prove to all the critics that he was world-class, at least with regards to set-pieces. But should he miss, the critics would continue dubbing him as another overrated free-kick taker and a player only mimicking the style of David Beckham.

Olav was sure of his conjecture because that was how the world worked. People mostly tended to focus on the negatives more than the positives. Even though Zachary had scored a goal and provided an assist during the final, there would still be critics pointing out his errors during the heat of the game. A missed free kick would be a vital talking point in the sports news the following day. Olav was, of course, eager to be the journalist adding the oil to the fire, should such a situation transpire.

FWEEEEEEEE

The referee blew the whistle and signaled for Zachary to take the free-kick after the medics had helped Nicki Nielsen, the injured center-forward, off the pitch.

Zachary didn't waste any time taking a few steps back from the ball before looking around to assess the situation in the box. At that instant, his body language and posture were just like those of an apex predator eyeing its favorite prey. He seemed to be radiating an indomitable aura as he readied himself to take the set-piece.

Olav had already done his research. He was sure the boy prodigy was analyzing every factor that could influence his set-piece at that moment. Be it the positioning of the wall, the players in the box, the standing posture of the keeper, and even the direction of the breeze — they were all factors that could impede his accuracy. So, he'd to take note of those influences before his execution.

FWEEEEEEE

The referee blew the whistle again and signaled for Zachary to hurry up and take the set-piece. Olav Brusveen could feel his heartbeat accelerating as he watched the boy prodigy make the standard angled run towards the ball. Without any excess movements, the young midfielder tilted his body backward before unleashing the perfect curveball already familiar to the football community in Norway. His technique was immaculate and pleasing to the eye.

"Make sure that you capture all that," Olav didn't forget to remind his camera crew before Zachary struck. He watched the ball's concave trajectory over the wall with bated breath. Before he could get a response, the ball was already grazing off the post and dipping into the back of the net. The ball's sheer velocity hadn't even allowed the keeper to react.

"Brilliant!"

Olav Brusveen's heart stirred as several headlines for the following day whirled through his mind after witnessing that free-kick from Zachary. He could only conclude that the boy was a genius — or probably a monster, with nerves of steel. Even in a crucial moment in the final, he remained composed and performed as usual while taking the free-kick. The young midfielder was that scary — and Olav could only feel sorry for opposing goalkeepers that would have to go against him in the near future.

A pang of happiness streaked through Coach Johansen after he watched Zachary convert the free-kick to put Rosenborg in an almost unassailable position. The score was then three to one in favor of his side, and he was about to win his second trophy of the season.

His players had outdone themselves in the Norwegian Cup final. They'd played like champions on all fronts, whether in defense, midfield, or on the attack. The flanks, the crossing, and the goal attempts were all fierce, constantly causing their opponents plenty of problems. The only blemish on their performance was that one time they'd relaxed and allowed Molde to score during the first half.

"Coach," the voice of Dr. Eivind Pedersen, the Rosenborg medic, sounded from beside him, breaking his moment of reverie.

"Yes, Dr. Pedersen," Coach Johansen said, creasing his brows. "How is Nicki faring? Is his injury serious?"

"Well," Dr. Pedersen replied with a steady voice. "From my initial examination, I can only conclude that it's only a bruise on his shin. The impact from the opponent's boot must have damaged some tissue, leading to a minor injury."

Coach Johansen couldn't help but frown. Nicki Nielsen was his star striker, and he didn't want to lose such a sharp player when he was about to face Standard Liège in the Europa League in a few days. "Is he still fit to continue the match?"

"With a bit of first aid, he sure can continue playing," the medic replied. "But my recommendation is that we take him out immediately to be on the safe side. But, it's your call, coach."

"Then, we'll follow your recommendation and let him rest for the remainder of the match," Coach Johansen said before turning towards his assistant. "Trond! Go ahead and inform André to start warming up. I want him on the pitch in less than five minutes."

"Aye, coach," Trond Henriksen, the assistant, replied.

Zachary was in high spirits as the game approached the final stages of the second half. He didn't relax in the slightest even though his team was leading by three goals to one. He continued doing his best to help his team overpower Molde's defense by playing his part as an attacking midfielder to the best of his ability.

Whenever he would spot a gap in Molde's defense, he would either unleash a defense-splitting pass behind the backline or run at the defenders. His S-graded stamina and endurance attributes allowed him to continue putting up mind-blowing displays even as the match approached the 85th minute.

"Forwards!" Zachary heard the voice of Coach Johansen booming from the sidelines, just as the Molde players were starting to hoard possession by playing short aimless passes in the backline. "Push forward and try to exert more pressure on their defense. Let's utilize some high pressing to win back possession quickly. We need to score another goal before the final whistle." The coach punctuated his words with thunderous clapping of his hands to motivate the players.

Zachary reacted immediately on hearing Coach Johansen's instructions. He rushed forward like a whirlwind, eyeing Vegard Forren, the Molde center-back, who'd just received the ball in Molde's backline. However, the defender reacted promptly and passed the ball towards the left-flank before Zachary could approach his position.

Nevertheless, Zachary didn't give up. He continued chasing the ball's trail towards the left flank like a bullet out of a muzzle.

He understood that he had to do most of the high pressing since Nicki Nielsen, the starting center-forward, was already out of the game due to an injury. So, he raced even more energetically than usual towards Knut Olav Rindarøy, Molde's left-back, who was about to receive the ball.

It was as if the lucky stars of Rosenborg were perfectly aligned that day. Just as Zachary was about to give up his chase, he noticed that the defender had taken a poor and slightly heavier first touch on the incoming ball. As a result, it'd rolled a yard or two behind, causing the defender to panic.

"Chance!"

Zachary exploded forward like a bullet train. He could feel the breeze whipping across his face as his long strides consumed yards of space like there was no tomorrow. Before the defender could rectify his

mistake and retrieve the ball from behind him, Zachary was already sliding in, boot skimming the green like a slippery snake in the grass. It was a well-timed tackle — one which the left-back could not avoid at that moment.

"REF!!!"

The defender could only shout out in distress as he tumbled to the ground after Zachary's outstretched boot had magically retrieved the ball.

However, Zachary didn't give a damn about the yelling defender. He was sure he hadn't committed a foul since he'd gotten the ball before sending the left-back to the ground. Thence, there was no reason for the referee or the nearby linesman to penalize him.

With the agility of a wild cat, he picked himself from the ground, not taking a second glance at the defender. He took off like a bat out of hell for Molde's goal before the other defenders could react to the situation.

Vegard Forren, one of the Molde center-backs, soon came to close him down, all guns blazing like a raging bull. However, Zachary didn't lose his composure in the slightest. He just slowed down slightly, stepped on the ball and spun 180 degrees around the defender to complete his second Marseille turn of the match. He then pulled the ball with him as he whirled away from the defender's reach.

A second later, he could hear the cheers around the stadium hitting a thunderous crescendo as he completed the turn and faced the approaching goalkeeper. It was the moment of truth, and as usual, he didn't lose his cool.

He simply looped the ball over the keeper with an elusive chip, sending it just inside the far post. With that, he'd managed to score Rosenberg's 4th goal and bagged yet another hat-trick in his professional career. He raced like mad towards the corner flag to celebrate the goal with his teammates.

The match ended shortly after, with Rosenberg still leading 4:1 against Molde. In a matter of minutes, the officials started setting up a podium in preparation for the trophy ceremony while the Rosenberg

players and coaching staff moved around the edges of the field to thank the fans. In the meantime, reporters were all over the place, their cameras flashing as they interviewed players. The whole field of play was a hubbub of activity in the minutes after the final whistle.

Zachary watched the chaos while taking a brief moment of rest in the center circle after escaping some particularly persistent reporters. Everything felt surreal.

In his first season of professional football, he'd played a crucial role in helping his team win the domestic double. He'd also become the top scorer of two of the most prestigious tournaments in Norway. It was a dream come true as far as he was concerned.