

Greatest 301

Chapter 301 - The Remorseful Mr. Christophe

Rosenborg BK 2: IF Elfsborg 0

In the audience, the fans were extremely excited. Rosenborg had managed to score the second goal in the 83rd minute through Nicki Nielsen, the striker who'd just returned from an injury. The whole stadium was boiling with excitement as the home fans cheered at the top of their voices to celebrate the goal.

"That run by Zachary from the left-wing was something else," a young man, probably in his 20s, said. He was a die-hard fan of Rosenborg, who never missed any matches at Lerkendal. "It's a pity that he missed the goal in the end."

"What are you saying?" Another fan responded, his eyes narrowing. "Zachary never misses. It's just the keeper who performed abnormally and managed to save the day. But in the end, he ended up gifting Nicki Nielsen with an opportunity to score the second goal."

"I'm just saying that it would have been good if Zachary scored the goal," the young man responded, trying his best to make himself heard over the din in the stadium. "But it's all good since we're about to qualify for the knock-out stages."

"Which team will we face in the round of 32? Hopefully, it won't be one of those powerhouses that have just dropped from the Champions League."

"The draw for the next round will be held next week," the other fan said, stroking his thick beard. "We'll have to wait until then to find out about our next opponents."

The game resumed after the goal celebrations. The IF Elfsborg players switched to a higher gear and started launching wave after wave of attacks against Rosenborg. They even started utilizing a Tiki-taka style of play, coupled with phenomenal bursts of brilliance through the wing, to sustain their attacking pressure. Obviously, the Swedish giants hadn't given up even though they were trailing by two goals in the 85th minute.

However, the Rosenborg players continued playing like champions throughout the remaining minutes. They made their formation compact and simply focused on defending with all they had in the final stages of the second half. As a result, they prevented the Swedish giants from scoring even a single goal until the final whistle sounded after four minutes of added time.

Pays de la Loire, Nantes, France.

Since it was already the second week of December, a festive atmosphere was already in the air in this historic city of France.

Christmas lights were all over the place, blinking on and off in a multitude of colors. They shimmered like gems out of a fairy tale as they cast an ethereal feel upon the wide streets.

The other decorations, including the humongous Christmas trees, were so well-paced all over the city. They could easily tempt almost any intelligent soul to hum a Christmas hymn if they so happened to trek through the city, especially late at night.

However, there were always a few exceptions to every case.

Mr. Christophe Bernard, the head scout of FC Nantes, wasn't feeling the least bit festive, even as he walked through the wide streets of Nantes that night. He would often sigh or frown while slowly navigating the sparse human traffic on the sidewalk. He was clearly not in a good mood.

He'd just watched another Rosenborg match a few hours earlier. Once again, he'd witnessed Zachary Bemba, a player who he had let slip through his fingers, perform like the best of Maestros.

Back in Lubumbashi, he'd been sure that Zachary would never be able to grow into a phenomenal player due to his hidden injury. As a result, he'd opted to go with the four other young talents, instead of Zachary, after the trials.

Yet, a little more than three years down the road, Zachary, the player he'd ignored, was already performing splendidly in the Europa League. On the other hand, the players he'd selected were still struggling to make it onto the official roster of the Nantes reserve team. He couldn't help but wallow in melancholy when he recalled his decision back then.

"Bzzt Bzzzt! Bzzt Bzzzt!"

His phone started vibrating just as he approached the subway entrance a little while later. He couldn't help but frown ever so slightly after fishing it out of his pocket and glancing at the screen. That was because the person calling was the sporting director of FC Nantes. For sure, it wasn't to deliver good news, especially at such a late hour of the evening.

Be that as it may, he braced himself and decided to accept the call since it was his boss on the other end of the line.

"Hello, Mr. Christophe," the director said in French as soon as he'd pressed the "accept" button and placed the phone next to his ear. "How's your evening?"

"My evening is fine," Mr. Christophe lied. "To what do I owe the pleasure of receiving a call from you at this time of the evening?"

"Nothing much," the director replied in a relaxed manner. "I'm just checking up on the issue about Zachary Bemba, the young player who's currently playing for Rosenborg. I heard that he participated in the trials you conducted in Lubumbashi, DR Congo, a few years back. Is that true?"

"Here it comes," Mr. Christophe thought but said, "Yes, that's true. He was part of the group of young men that took part in the ADTA trials held in 2010."

"Then, why didn't you select him at the time? How could a talented scout like you miss out on a player with such potential? What exactly happened?"

"Well," Mr. Christophe said, trying his best to organize his thoughts as quickly as possible. "I could tell that he was a talented player even back then. However, there was a problem with his background check."

He'd suffered a problematic ankle injury, which I thought would significantly affect his career. That's why I didn't choose him as one of the talents for our academy at the time."

"Surely, you must have missed something. Didn't you do any follow-up medical tests for the player?"

"Nope."

"Then, how could you be sure that the injury would significantly affect his career without doing any follow-up medical tests?"

"We had a small window of time for the trials in Lubumbashi," the scout said, trying his utmost to sound casual. "That was because of our tight schedule, which necessitated us to travel to over ten African countries within a month. So, I went with the most cost-effective method of conducting a brief background check on all the players with potential at the time."

"What a pity," the director said from the other end of the line. "This Zachary Bemba is one of the most talented players in the younger generation today. He might even have a chance of winning next year's Golden Boy award if he can help his team reach the later stages of the Europa League. Did you manage to get acquainted with him back in Congo?"

"Nope."

"This is really not like you, Christophe," the director said. "You miss out on a player filled with potential, and you even fail to make any tangible connections with him. Why were you so dull?"

Mr. Christophe could only remain silent when faced with such accusations. He already regretted his decision back then after watching a few of Rosenborg's Europa League matches. So, there was no need for him to be argumentative.

The director sighed audibly from the other end of the line after a short while. "Do you think there's a possibility that we can attract him here, especially since he would have the companionship of his countrymates on our team?"

"Please, stop joking, Mr. Director," Mr. Christophe was quick to reply. "There are plenty of top teams in the four big leagues that will be willing to sign him — come the next transfer window. So, logically speaking, there's no reason for him to join our team, which is still toiling in League 2. My advice to you, Mr. Director, is to forget about him."

"What a pity," the director said, sighing once again. "It would have been a blessing to have such a talented player on our squad. However, because of a certain someone, we missed out. Truly a pity!"

Chapter 302 - Kristin's Considerations

The following day.

ZACHARY BEMBA STRIKES ONCE AGAIN TO PROPEL ROSEBORG INTO THE KNOCK-OUT STAGE OF THE EUROPA LEAGUE!

Kristin could not help but smile after reading the headline on TV2-Sporten's official website. As Zachary's publicity secretary, she was really happy for him from the bottom of her heart. She truly wished him plenty of more success in the years to come.

But above all, she was happy that Rosenborg had qualified for the Europa League's knock-out stages for the first time in over two years. With nine points from six matches, the Troll Kids had finally firmly established themselves as second in Group C and managed to snatch one of the spots in the round of thirty-two.

On the other hand, Standard Liège, the club from Belgium, had once again lost to Red Bull Salzburg by a score of two goals to one in the previous day's fixture. As a result, they'd remained stuck at six points and only managed to place as third in Group C. So, they could only bow out of this season's Europa League.

"What are you reading that's making you smile this early in the morning?" Monica R?nning, her flatmate, asked from across the table. The two of them were feasting on a sumptuous breakfast in the living room of their apartment located in Stj?rdalsveien.

"I'm just looking at some of today's sports headlines," Kristin replied after taking a slight sip on her coffee. "The most trending topics on all the major news platforms and the popular sports blogs are Zachary and Rosenborg's qualification for the next round of the Europa League."

"I heard that Zachary was involved in both the two goals of Rosenborg last night," Monica remarked, punctuating her words with a sip on her orange juice.

"Yes, he created both goals almost out of nothing," Kristin replied with a sigh. "He single-handedly dissected the IF Elfsborg defense on both occasions to create the two goal-scoring opportunities. He managed to score the first from the penalty spot and then, later on, created an opportunity for Nicki to score the second. He was truly incredible on both occasions."

"How does he really do it?" Monica mumbled. "Counting the one goal from yesterday, he should already be having a tally of seven goals in the Europa League. Isn't that right?"

"Yes, that's true." Kristin nodded. "He's already the top scorer despite the fact that he has only played three of the six group fixtures of the tournament. His form is incredible these days."

"Wow!" Monica said, glancing squarely at her friend from across the table. "Do you know what this means? Do you understand the repercussions of his continued incredible performances and his increased fame, especially on the European stage?"

"What exactly are you implying, Monica?"

"I'm just trying to say that Zachary will most likely be leaving Rosenborg soon," Monica replied with a sigh. "Think about it logically. By now, even the top teams around Europe should have heard about him. They should be already making plans to steal Zachary from Rosenborg. I don't expect a player as good as him to say no to all those mouth-watering offers."

"You're right," Kristin said, creasing her brows. "But, why are you telling me this? I would still be happy for Zachary if he left Rosenborg and moved on to the greener pastures like the five big leagues in

Europe. The only thing I wouldn't tolerate is him moving to a team like Molde. But that won't happen unless Roman Abramovich purchases the club. So, there's no need for me to worry."

"What I meant to ask is what your plans are, especially since Zachary will most likely be leaving Trondheim soon. Do you plan on continuing as his publicity secretary, or will you focus on only school and give up on the job?"

Kristin could not help but sink into a moment of contemplation on hearing the question. She really loved working as Zachary's publicity secretary since the position had allowed her to interact with professionals in the sports industry. As a result, she was one step closer to achieving her dream of working as both a scout and an agent in the footballing world.

The position had also awarded her a lucrative wage of 40,000 NOK per month. She was already making money that most people in the world couldn't hope to touch until they had finished their university studies. Moreover, there was even a possibility of earning more if Zachary moved on to greener pastures. And that was why she didn't want to give up her position as Zachary's publicity secretary for anything in the world.

But there was one issue with the whole picture. Kristin was still a student who'd just commenced her studies at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) in Trondheim. So, if Zachary decided to transfer out of Rosenborg and out of Trondheim, she, as his publicity secretary, would have to follow him wherever he went. The other option would be to give up the position and only concentrate on her studies while hoping to land another similar job in the future.

What was she to do?

For a moment, Kristin was in a dilemma. One option was the traditional way of investing in her future through studying. The other had already allowed her to take firm steps towards achieving her dream career even before completing her university studies. If she was to be really honest with herself, she didn't want to lose either.

"I don't know what to do yet?" Kristin mumbled after a short while of contemplation. "What would you do if you were in my shoes?"

A soft smile lit up Monica's face as she held her friend's gaze. "If you want to continue your studies and also hold on to your job at the same time, you could think about transferring to another university. If you play your cards right, you might even enroll in a university that will straight away allow you to continue your program of study. In that case, you wouldn't have to waste a year since there wouldn't be any need to restart your course from the beginning."

"But," Monica continued, her tone turning solemn. "Before deciding to transfer, you should first get confirmation that will allow you to remain as Zachary's employee, at least throughout the duration of your university studies. That means you'll have to negotiate for a working contract of a minimum of three years before you agree to transfer out of NTNU and then follow Zachary to wherever he'll be going. With the contract in place, you can be sure of your future even if the working relationship between you and Zachary breaks down. At least, you'll get compensation and be able to continue your studies."

"That's really a good solution," Kristin said, the fog clouding her mind clearing. "I'll talk to Zachary and his agent about the idea before the festive season. If their response is positive, then I'll have to start the preparations of transferring out of NTNU soon. Thank you, Monica, for the advice."

"I'm glad to be of help any time," Monica said, her delicate facial features blossoming into a smile. "But don't you dare forget me when you make it big as some football scout or agent out there."

Kristin pursed her lips, suppressing a giggle. "How can I forget you when you're about to join the Olympics team? That would be unbecoming of me as a person who wants to make it big in the sports industry."

"Jokes aside," Kristin continued. "Do you wish to attend Rosenberg's end-of-year banquet tomorrow evening? If you do, I can guarantee to get you an invite from the organizers."

"You can even get yourself some invitations to a Rosenberg club party!" Monica exclaimed, raising her brows.

"Have you forgotten that I'm still working there as an intern? It's no big deal getting an invitation for one of my friends to attend the party. So, do you wish to go or not?"

"Of course, I wish to go, girl," Monica was quick to reply with a smile. "Just get me the invitation."

"Good." Kristin nodded. "Just prepare a formal evening dress for tomorrow evening. I'll get the invitations by the end of today."

Chapter 303 - Rosenborg's End-of-Year Banquet

Saturday, December 14, 2013.

Nightfall came with the whisper of perfect black that grew into a comforting chorus of stars. Upon the snow-lit eve, reflecting streetlamp gold into the black, Zachary was comfortably nestled in his Audi R8 GT, navigating the evening traffic on the streets of Trondheim. Beside him in the passenger's seat was Camilla, who was humming the popular Rihanna hit — Diamonds — that was at that moment playing on the car stereo.

Zachary barely stayed below the speed limit for most of the journey since the two of them were already late for Rosenborg's end-of-year banquet at the Scandic Lerkendal Hotel. He cruised through the streets like an expert race driver, and soon, the lavishly decorated entrance of the hotel was in sight.

"We are here!" He said after a few more seconds of driving. Without waiting for a response, he pulled up into one of the free parking spaces in front of the hotel before alighting from the vehicle and rushing to the other side to hold the door open for Camilla.

"There you go, my dear," he said with a smile as he opened the door and stepped to the side.

Camilla suppressed a giggle, the corners of her lips lifting into a gorgeous smile. "Thank you, Zach," she said, stepping out of the door to take his hand. "I'm already enjoying this. Maybe, we should start going to parties a little more often."

"I'm sorry, but that's just not possible," Zachary said as he locked the car doors. "Professional athletes should endeavor to limit partying to the bare minimum. So, I can't accompany you to most of those parties. That's why I have to give my apologies in advance."

"That's a pity," Camilla said with a smile, seemingly not taking Zachary's refusal to heart. "Isn't the banquet somewhere around here? Why is the whole parking lot abnormally quiet?" She asked, glancing around.

"That's because we're a bit late," Zachary replied, shaking his head. "The others should already be inside. Shall we head to the venue, my dear?"

"Okay, lead the way," Camilla said, beaming.

Without further ado, they started moving towards the hotel's entrance, taking care not to slip on the frozen pavement.

Since they were heading to Rosenberg's end-of-year banquet, the two of them were dressed to kill. Zachary had donned a classy grey tuxedo that accentuated his tall frame. One look at him, and you would think he was a male model headed out for a photoshoot of a famous men's magazine. On the other hand, Camilla was in a chic party dress — the kind that emphasized her long legs and brought out the green in her eyes. She looked even more stunning than usual that night.

A few minutes later, Zachary finally arrived at the banquet venue under the guidance of the hotel staff. He couldn't help but do a double-take when he stepped into the hall with Camilla by his side. It was as if he'd entered a dreamland. Be it the fragrances floating all over the place, the easy and natural colors upon the eyes, and the happy chatter in the background — they all gave the venue a delightful party vibe.

On further looking around, Zachary could see that the organizers had put a lot of effort into preparing the venue. The decorations, the tables, the lights, and the stage were all immaculately arranged to give the room an ethereal feel. And as a finishing touch to the entire setup, Rosenberg's two trophies for that season had been placed atop an elevated stand at the center.

"Let's find ourselves a table," Zachary said to Camilla after taking a moment to observe the setup of the venue. Without waiting for a response, he led her by the arm as they walked towards a table without

occupants. Before long, the two of them had already joined in on the festivities and started stuffing themselves with the various delicacies, desserts, and drinks that the banquet had to offer.

Zachary, on his part, was really having a blast that night. He truly relished the vibrant atmosphere of the banquet. With Camilla by his side, the evening wasn't the least bit boring. The two of them discussed various topics, big and small, to pass the time. They only separated and started socializing on their own an hour into the progression of the banquet.

Zachary then spent quite some time mingling with most of his teammates while enjoying some mocktail drinks. He also spared some time to talk to Kristin and a few other acquaintances who'd also attended the banquet. And in that manner, the minutes and hours flashed by quickly, and soon the festivities reached their climax.

Boyd Johansen, the head coach of Rosenborg, stood up and took center stage. "Good evening, ladies and gentlemen," he said with a smile. "Can I have a bit of your attention, please?"

His tone was commanding over the microphone, and soon, the entire venue quietened down. At that moment, all eyes were on Coach Johansen's tall frame as the audience waited for his address.

"It's really a pleasure for me to stand here before you as the head coach of Rosenborg after a year of great success," the coach began after clearing his throat. "It has been a long season, for sure. But we have finally ended it with a bang and managed to win two trophies. As I speak now, we're currently both the League trophy holders and also the Norwegian Cup winners."

The coach paused as a wave of applause arose from the audience. The Rosenborg players and staff, plus all the other banquet attendees, took their time clapping and cheering to celebrate Rosenborg's success. As a result, a merry mood was all over the air for the next few seconds.

The coach smiled, sweeping his gaze across the room as the applause subsided. "Let me take this opportunity to thank all of you who contributed to our great spell of victories."

"Thank you, my players, for doing the hard work," he continued, his voice rising slightly. "Thank you to all the other members of staff that have helped me in my daily duties as the head coach of Rosenborg. And above all, thank you to all our fans that have supported us with their all throughout the entire year."

I salute you all. Rosenberg wouldn't have achieved its current success if it wasn't for the relentless efforts of you all."

The venue exploded again, but that didn't stop the coach from continuing his impassioned speech.

"Today is a day of festivities," he said, lowering his voice. "I don't want to take up much of your time, rumbling-on on unrelated issues. So, it's my humble request that you allow me to step down from the stage since I also wish to rejoin the festivities as soon as possible."

"Permission granted!" A few of the Rosenberg players and staff yelled out loud while the rest of the audience laughed out loud. They were really enjoying themselves since they could even laugh at Coach Johansen's jokes.

"Just a moment, just a moment," the coach said, raising his hand to request for silence. "Before I step down from the stage, let me take this opportunity to welcome the club chairman to bless us with a few words as we continue on with this victory banquet."

"Mr. Chairman," the coach continued, turning to one side of the room where the club executives were seated. "The stage is now yours."

"Clap*Clap*Clap..."

Everyone in the audience started clapping enthusiastically as Ivar Koteng, the chairman of Rosenberg Ballklubb, took center stage. In a few words, he thanked all the players, staff, fans, and well-wishers of Rosenberg before returning to his seat.

After his speech, it was finally time for the prize-giving session. It was the climax for the entire banquet — the moment when Rosenberg's player of the season would be announced.

Mr. Eric Hoftun, Rosenberg's sporting director, soon stepped onto the stage to announce the prizes. He gave a friendly smile before he cleared his throat and spoke in a steady tone.

"The entire Rosenborg team has been quite exceptional this season. The defense has been quite solid, the midfield greatly versatile, while the attackers have been extremely sharp." He paused, sweeping his gaze across the entire audience that was waiting with bated breath.

"However," he continued. "One player has stood out from among the rest this season. He has matured greatly in less than a year, casting away his status as a newbie from the academy and becoming a first-team player. Of recent, he has even managed to establish himself as an irreplaceable offensive pivot of the team. Whenever he is on the field of play, the opponents will tremble — simply because he can score from any angle at any given moment."

"As you all know, he has already managed to score quite a number of goals in various competitions this year. Among those are his seven goals in the Europa League, which have helped Rosenborg qualify for this year's Europa League knock-out stages. For me, it's always a pleasure whenever I watch him on the field of play."

"Let's put our hands together for Zachary Bemba, Rosenborg's player of the season!"

The venue exploded right after the announcement. The thunderous applause was like nothing else at that moment.

Zachary didn't lose his composure from all the attention. He squeezed Camilla's hand to acknowledge her almost silent congratulatory message before marching towards the stage. He then received the best-player award under the gaze of the entire crowd and numerous flashes of the cameras in the venue.

At that moment, he could hardly contain his excitement since he'd once again managed to win another accolade very early in his second life. It really meant a lot to him, even though it was just a trivial team-best-player award.

The awards ceremony only continued after he'd returned to his seat. To no one's surprise, Nicki Nielsen won the best Rosenborg forward accolade — while Mikael Dorsin went home with the best defensive player award. And, of course, Rosenborg's season's best-midfielder and club top-scorer accolades went to Zachary. With that, he'd managed to win three honors on a single evening and created a sort of a record.. Thus, he was really over the moon when he exited the banquet venue and headed home with Camilla later that night.

Chapter 304 - The Europa League Knock-out Stage Draw

Zachary's daily workload lightened considerably after Rosenberg's end-of-year banquet. It was the off-season in Norway, and there were no compulsory team training sessions or matches for him to attend. So, he spent most of his time training alone, hoping to make further improvements before the commencement of the following season.

He didn't rush to consume the A-graded vitality-enhancing elixir, stored in the system inventory, but only focused on elevating his physical condition to its peak. He was trying his best to achieve his best state possible so as to gain maximum benefits when he finally consumed the elixir.

For the following few days, he would wake up early in the morning to jog and then head to the gym after breakfast. In the afternoon, he would attend a fitness session guided by Coach Bjørn Peters, his fitness trainer, before ending his daily training with a one-hour yoga session late in the evening. In that manner, the days flashed by quickly, and soon, it was Tuesday, the day for the Europa League's knock-out stage draw.

Zachary ended his training early and hurriedly returned home to watch the draw live on television. It featured thirty-two teams, with several big names like Juventus, Ajax, Tottenham, and Sevilla. For sure, there would be some very thrilling encounters in the next stage of the tournament.

"Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen," the host of the draw said with a smile right after the clock hand had pointed to the twelve o'clock mark. "Welcome to this year's Europa League round of thirty-two and round of sixteen draws..."

After a round of introductions and greetings, the host quickly started explaining the nature of the draw. The rules were quite detailed and clear to Zachary.

In the draw for the round of thirty-two, the twelve Europa League group winners and the four third-placed teams from the Champions League group stage with the better group records would be the seeded clubs. On the other hand, the twelve group runners-up and the other four third-placed teams from the Champions League group stage would be the unseeded opponents. The seeded teams would then be drawn against the unseeded teams, with the seeded teams hosting the second leg. However, teams that were previously from the same group or those from the same association could not be drawn against each other.

For the round of sixteen and onwards, there would be no seedings. The teams that were previously from the same group or even those from the same association could clash if the draw pitted them against each other. For instance, an English Premier League club might face an opponent from the same league.

Or they might even have to play an opponent they formerly faced in the group stages of the Europa League.

The host spoke in a steady and confident tone, and in a matter of a few minutes, he finished explaining the rules of the draw. He then invited three gentlemen onto the stage, and the proceedings moved on to the actual drawing of the teams.

Zachary was tense as he waited for Rosenberg's next opponents in the round of thirty-two of the Europa League. And finally, after having waited for more than 10 minutes, Rosenberg's name was picked from the pot of unseeded teams and soon drawn against Fiorentina, the Italian side. It was the last drawing for the night, and the event ended soon after.

Zachary could not help but crease his brows as he sunk into a moment of contemplation. His team, Rosenberg, would have to defeat Fiorentina if they wanted to qualify for the round of sixteen of the Europa League. And if they did qualify, they would have to face either Juventus, the infamous Italian giants, or Trabzonspor, the team from Turkey, before qualifying for the quarter-finals of the Europa League.

Both fixtures were not easy.

"Maybe, we can win!"

Zachary inwardly tried to encourage himself. But deep down, he understood that Rosenberg's chances of besting teams like Fiorentina or Juventus when playing two legs were minimal.

Both Italian clubs had enough depth in their squads to render Rosenberg helpless on the field of play. Not even the most ingenious football tactics could overcome such an obvious gap in player and squad ability, as long as all the other factors remained constant.

Thus, unless the goddess of luck favored Rosenberg during the following two stages of the Europa League, Zachary and his teammates would find themselves hard-pressed to achieve any results from those fixtures. It was a simple truth.

"Maybe, I should encourage coach Johansen to sign a few of those not-yet-famous forwards and wingers from my previous life," Zachary mused. "As long as we strengthen the attacking force, then Rosenborg will have a fair chance of competing against those big names like Fiorentina and Juventus."

Zachary wasn't inclined to leave the outcome of the crucial round of thirty-two fixture to luck. That was because he still had a potential system penalty of 120,000 Juju points hanging over his head. Should his team fail to beat Fiorentina and qualify for the round of sixteen, then he would be in deep shit.

So, instead of placing his hopes on something as uncertain as luck, why not strengthen his team before the fixture by encouraging his coach to sign more phenomenal talents? Zachary was sure that as long as he made any suggestions concerning the issue, Coach Johansen would take them seriously, considering their relationship and history together. It was worth a try, for sure.

Zachary got to work immediately after making the resolution. He opened his laptop and soon started browsing the internet to search for information on some famous names in football from his previous life.

First, he eliminated all the footballers already playing in the top seven European leagues and the Brazilian Serie A. Such players would most likely not be interested in joining a third-tier league team like Rosenborg since they were already contented where they were. So, there was no point in including them on the list of players that could strengthen Rosenborg's squad in the near future.

Zachary only needed players that Rosenborg could afford at that moment. So, he spent more than two hours browsing the web and filtering out names. But soon, he realized that it was a more difficult task to discover talented strikers when compared to defenders.

That was because all the famous forwards he could recall were already playing for big clubs at that time. Phenomenal players, like Harry Kane, Riyad Mahrez, Sadio Mane, Duván Zapata, Mo Salah, Kylian Mbappé, and many others, were already connected to clubs with a financial muscle much bigger than Rosenborg. So, unless he went for those young teenagers, like Dele Ali, Alex Iwobi, or Erling Haaland, he wouldn't be able to find any available and affordable striker for Rosenborg.

But would signing such youngsters help Rosenborg overpower Fiorentina or Juventus the following year? Zachary hurriedly discarded the thought before it could take root in his mind.

Those youngsters, of course, possessed immense potential. They would mature into very dangerous attackers, maybe, three to five years from then. However, they might not even make the squad for

Rosenborg's match against Fiorentina in February simply because of their young age and inexperience at the moment.

"Damn!"

Zachary was really frustrated as he continued going over the list of strikers in his mind without results. But, he didn't give up until he landed on a few inconspicuous names that could add some depth to Rosenborg's squad. They were not Zachary's first choice, but he could only compromise since he understood Rosenborg's financial situation.

After compiling the list, Zachary settled on one of the sofas in his living room before dialing Coach Johansen's phone number. "Good evening, coach," he said right after the call had connected. "How's your afternoon?"

"My afternoon is fine, Zachary?" Coach Johansen replied from the other end of the line. "What about you? How's your vacation? Did you go home, or are you still here in Trondheim?"

"I'm still here in Trondheim," Zachary replied. "But the vacation is going on well. Coach! Did you watch today's Europa League draw?"

"Of course, I did. I wouldn't have missed it for anything in the world. We're facing Fiorentina in February. What are your thoughts?"

"Well," Zachary said, taking a moment to organize his thoughts. "They're tough opponents, especially since they're now fourth on the Italian League table. We'll face a hard time against them for sure. But football is football. We can still win if we give our all during the match."

"Oh!" Coach Johansen said. "From your tone, I guess you're not that confident. But don't you worry. We have plenty of time without competitive football to prepare for the match. As long as we prepare well, we can win against any opponents."

"Oh, okay, I guess you're right," Zachary said, obviously not convinced. "Coach! I just called to alert you about a few players with potential that I've just chanced upon when watching football matches on the internet."

"Players filled with potential!" Coach Johansen exclaimed, his voice rising a pitch higher. "Go on. I'm listening."

"Do you have a pen and paper with you, coach?"

"Yes, I do."

"Okay, I will mention the names of the players now. The first one is Japanese forward named Takumi Minamino. At the moment, he's playing for a club in Japan named Cerezo Osaka. If you play your cards right, you might acquire his services at a small fee."

"The second player is also from Japan. He goes by the name of Yuya Osaka and is now playing for a club based in Tokyo called Kashima Antlers. He's a forward who's dangerous both inside and outside the box."

"And finally, the third player is Karl Toko Ekambi, a forward currently playing for Paris FC. He's a power forward who can play on both wings or even as a number-10. If Rosenberg could manage to purchase him, you would have some more options when organizing tactics against those big names in the Europa League."

"I have given you all the names now," Zachary continued. "It's up to you to see if they have got what it takes to join Rosenberg."

"Okay, Zachary," Coach Johansen said from the other end of the line. "I've noted down all the names. I will get some of our free scouts to assess them as soon as possible. If they're as good as you say, then I'll do my best to try and sign them."

"Thanks, coach," Zachary said.

"No, I should be the one thanking you, Zachary," the coach hurriedly said. "I'm glad that you're still thinking about the future of the club. But there is one thing I need to ask. Did you happen to find out about those players when watching matches online? Or have you hired a scout that is helping you unearth all those players?"

"I watch a lot of football during my free time," Zachary replied in a poised tone. "And when I happen to spot a good player during a match, I'll always take note of him. That's how I found out about those three players."

"Okay, then," the coach said. "Thanks for the info. But since it's vacation time, endeavor to take some rest. Okay?"

"Yes, coach."

"Good. If there's nothing else, I'll have to say goodbye for now. Is there anything else?"

"No," Zachary replied. "That's all."

Chapter 305 - Consuming The Elixirs

Zachary felt a sense of urgency building up within him after watching the Europa League draw.

Rosenborg would be facing off against Fiorentina on February 20th in the first leg showdown of the Europa League's round of thirty-two fixture. The second leg would then be held a week later, on the 27th, to determine the team that would qualify for the next stage of the tournament. So, he only had a bit more than two months to prepare for the new season of competitive football.

Moreover, if he were to factor in the festive season, the pre-season training sessions, and the potential friendly matches, the available time would reduce to about a month and a half. Thus, he had to make the proper adjustments to his training plans and utilize every resource at his disposal to improve his skills as quickly as possible. And that's why he'd decided to immediately consume the vitality-enhancing-elixir that'd been collecting dust in the system inventory.

He'd obtained the vitality-enhancing-elixir as a mission reward for completing one of the milestones of the system's 2013 Tippeligaen Serial Challenge mission. However, to prevent the side effects from affecting his daily performance, he'd hardened his heart and decided not to consume the elixir at the time.

But at the moment, it was already the offseason. There were no upcoming competitive football matches or daily team training sessions to consider. So, it was the ideal time window for Zachary to consume the elixir without hindering his football career.

Moreover, since there were only five days remaining to Christmas day, most of his neighbors had already traveled to who knows where. As a result, his neighborhood was quiet, without many people loitering around. It was thus the perfect location to consume the vitality-enhancing-elixir without worrying about potential disturbances.

Everything was in order, and Zachary decided to act right away.

On that Thursday evening, he returned home from the gym earlier than usual. He went through a one-hour yoga routine before taking a warm shower to relax his muscles. After that, he feasted on a sumptuous early dinner to sate his hunger before meditating slightly to adjust his mental state.

Back then, when he'd just returned back in time, he'd consumed a B-graded version of the vitality-enhancing-elixir and suffered a great deal from its effects. So, this time around, he had to be prepared mentally. And that's why he was trying his best to achieve his best condition since he understood how potent an A-graded version of the elixir was.

The minutes flashed by quickly, and soon, the clock hand pointed to seven o'clock in the evening. Zachary ended his meditation and drew all his blinds, thus isolating himself in his living room. After ensuring that he'd latched the door properly, he then settled down on his yoga mat before summoning the system interface. With a slight shimmer, the familiar crystal-like display immediately materialized before him.

"System," he said, glancing at the interface. "I would like to consume both the A-graded physical conditioning-elixir and the vitality-enhancing-elixir right away."

"Command received," the system AI replied immediately. "Confirming... The user has a single dose of an A-graded vitality-enhancing-elixir and another single dose of an A-graded physical conditioning elixir stored in the system inventory."

"The user can select the respective cards in the inventory to summon the elixirs. But, the user should consume the elixirs within five seconds after their removal from the system inventory. Otherwise, their effects will disappear if they spend more time out of the inventory."

"Okay, okay," Zachary said, glancing at the two cards that had just floated forward and occupied the entire length of the crystal-like display before him.

One card depicted an image of a small apple, with the words "Vitality-Enhancing-Elixir" inscribed below it. Another portrayed a small banana, which was usually the form of the physical-conditioning-elixir in the system inventory.

The two cards were glittering slightly at the edges, causing Zachary's heart to throb with anticipation. There was a chance of his agility attribute breaking through to the S-grading after consuming the two elixirs. So, how could he not be excited?

Zachary decided not to dilly-dally any longer. He first clicked on the card portraying the image of the banana. And voila, the banana, the size of small candy, popped out of the translucent blue screen the next moment.

Zachary immediately gulped it down, only in two bites. But he didn't stop just at that. Without bothering with the refreshing sensation spreading around his body, he summoned the vitality-enhancing elixir in the form of an apple and also gobbled it down in a single bite. After that, Zachary lay supine on the yoga mat and braced himself for the effects of the two elixirs that were about to kick in.

At first, there was only a rejuvenating feeling circulating from his stomach and slowly spreading to the rest of his body. Then the pain came abruptly.

Before he could adapt, a tingling sensation similar to low voltage electric shocks passed through his entire being, causing him to shudder with agony. It was as if thousands of tiny ants were drilling into his body and squirming around while eating away his blood and flesh.

The pain was almost too much for Zachary to withstand. However, he could still feel the weird changes happening to his body, even in his dazed state. It was as if there were strands of alien substances slowly infusing themselves into his blood, veins, tissues, and bones.

Some of those strands even slowly started imbuing themselves into his brain region after a short while, and the pain tormenting his head grew in intensity. He couldn't see anything and couldn't even move his body as it was out of his control. And finally, after suffering such discomfort for a few more minutes, he couldn't take it anymore.

He fainted.

After a long time, Zachary woke up.

The searing pain had already disappeared, replaced by a numb feeling coursing through his entire body. However, the numbness was also fast fading — and in its place was a growing warm sensation overflowing within him.

Unexpectedly, after this sensation grew to a certain level, he felt a wonderful blissfulness envelop his entire being. The feeling was like nothing he'd experienced before, so comfortable and fulfilling to the very core.

Moreover, his body seemed to be full of energy at that moment, and just as he stretched, slight audible cracking sounds could be heard from his joints. For sure, the vitality-elixir had benefited him greatly.

But just as he was about to summon the system interface to check out the extent of his improvement, his nose twitched slightly. A potent fishy smell was at that moment assaulting his senses, making it hard for him to breathe normally.

Zachary was slightly startled. He hurriedly observed the entire outline of his body. Unexpectedly, a thin greasy layer coated the skin on the exposed parts of his body.

"What the hell?" Zachary yelled in surprise. "Isn't this the stuff of legends where powerhouses expel the foul substances from their bodies as they grow stronger?"

Zachary's brows creased together as he continued observing his body. He had a feeling that he might turn into a superhuman if he continued consuming the system's high-grade elixirs. But he reckoned that there was nothing to worry about at the moment. Whether the changes were a bad or good thing, he would have to wait and see what the future had in store for him.

Zachary didn't continue lying on the floor with such a stench hovering all over him. He hurriedly took a quick shower before returning to the living room and summoning the system interface again. He was in a rush to find out the changes in his attributes after consuming the elixir.

"System," he intoned, rubbing his hands together in anticipation. "Bring up my physical attributes stats right away."

"Command received," the apathetic voice of the system's AI sounded the next moment. "Host's physical fitness attributes will be coming up on the system interface in a bit."

"Excellent!"

Zachary immediately focused his gaze on the crystal-like display before him. Without further ado, he started perusing through the contents on the displayed page of the interface.

*USER STATS

->Physical Fitness (Av. Rating: S-)

Body Control (Balance and Coordination): S-

Agility: S-

Strength: S-

Stamina: S-

Endurance Points: 17,500/18,000 (S-)

"OMG!" Zachary yelled in surprise once again as his excitement shot through the roof. Both his agility and strength attributes had finally broken through to the S- grading after ingesting the elixir. As a result, all his fitness attributes had finally achieved the S-grading.

He'd only hoped to only raise his agility to the next level after consuming the elixir. However, he'd lucked out quite a bit by also being able to push his strength attribute to the S-grading.

Strength or power was an attribute that contributed significantly to a player's speed and agility. Furthermore, it impacted a player's ability to shoot, make long passes, defend and shield the ball. Great strength also allowed the player to win aerial duels and easily steal the ball from opponents.

Even ball wizards like Messi and Ronaldinho had to place emphasis on honing their strength-attribute. That was because, without strength and power in both the upper and lower body, even players as highly skilled as them could be easily pushed off the ball and lose possession. Strength was that important for a player.

Zachary couldn't help but crease his brows on looking further down the screen.. "As expected," he said, "it seems like my soccer-technique average rating has fallen to the A- grade after consuming such a potent elixir?" Without further ado, he clicked on the attribute to ascertain the exact change in his skills.

Chapter 306 - Training Plans

*USER STATS

->Soccer Technique: (Av. Rating: A- (A+))

Ball Control: A- (A+)

Dribbling Skills: B+ (A+)

Passing Accuracy: A- (A+)

Body Control: A+ (S-)

NB: The grades in the brackets represent the user's base stats or, in other words, the user's attributes before consuming the elixir.

Zachary's eyes narrowed even further after perusing through his soccer-technique stats.

Since his body fitness had improved by a large margin within a short period, his skills couldn't follow but had instead dipped to some extent. His ball control, dribbling skills, and passing accuracy had all dropped by a grade or two after consuming the potent vitality-enhancing-elixir. Additionally, his body

control attribute, formerly at the S-grade, had now fallen back to the A+ grade. Moreover, his technique might continue plateauing for a long time if he couldn't adapt to his new body attributes quickly.

A person's technique was perhaps the most visibly conspicuous element to success in football. Even an amateur could recognize a good technique. Does a player possess impeccable ball control? Is he fast with the ball at his feet, or can he dribble through opponents? And how's his passing ability? Those were some of the questions to consider when assessing a person's technique in football. They were the basic foundations of any football player if they wished to make it big in the game.

Thence, should a professional player experience even a slight dip in his technique, he would be in for a hard time. That was because the individual in question would automatically lose his form and immediately fall out of grace with the coaches.

In more severe cases, the player would become more prone to injuries since he would try to compensate for the dip in form with extra hard work on the field of play. That extra effort without the accompanying technique would often bring him in a hell-lot of excessive physical duels with opponents. And those duels were what brought about the spell of injuries for many off-form players.

All in all, a player might possess a high body fitness level with exceptional agility, strength, and endurance stats. However, if he had no football skills, he would still be mediocre on the field of play. That was why sprinting champions like Usain Bolt or Justin Gatlin would find it hard if they wanted to make it big in football. In their case, it was simply a matter of technique, not physical fitness.

However, in Zachary's case, the issue with his technique wasn't that severe since the side effects of the elixir were only temporary. So, as long as he underwent a targeted training regimen over the following two months, he would be able to return to his peak in a short while. There was even a chance of going further and elevating his skills to a higher level if he played his cards right.

Zachary's entire being was already throbbing with anticipation on thinking about how he could soon be able to increase his skills. "System," he said, glancing at the crystal-like display before him. "Could you establish a training plan that can help me in returning my football-technique attributes to their peak in the shortest time possible?"

"Command received," the system AI replied. "The system will deduct 200 Juju-point to assemble an appropriate training plan to suit the user's needs. Is that okay with the user?"

"That's okay," Zachary was quick to reply. "Go ahead and formulate the best training plan for me. It would be best if the plan could help me regain my peak state within a month."

"Command received," the AI replied. "200 Juju points deducted. A tailor-made training plan is being put together at the moment. Please wait!"

Zachary didn't have to wait for long. In only a matter of seconds, new contents appeared on the translucent bluish screen before him with a slight shimmer.

He blinked as his eyes adjusted to the lighting on the screen. Without further ado, he started going through the training plans that the system had just put together in the form of a mission.

G.O.A.T MISSIONS

#NEW MISSION: A forty-day training regimen to solidify the user's football techniques.

*Task 1: Run a distance of 5 miles every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday mornings (Must involve high-intensity running exercises such as sprinting in the outdoor environment).

*Task 2: One-hour gym work, including weight training, on Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday, and Sunday mornings. The user must complete the following exercises during those four sessions.

->100 squat-and-press routines with a pair of 15 kg dumbbells

->60 single-leg-squats (30 for each leg)

->60 push-ups

->60 sit-ups

->A 30-minute 'Controlled Mountain Climber' routine.

*Task 3: Rope jumping for thirty minutes on a daily basis.

*Task 4: Non-stop juggling the ball for one hour on a daily basis. The user should include both slow and quick motion juggling for better results.

*Task 5: A one-hour wall training session on a daily basis.

*Task 6: A one-hour agility session, including cone drills, on a daily basis. The user should include dribbling and trapping exercises for better results.

*Task 7: A one-hour swimming regimen two times a week. That is on Saturday and Sunday evenings.

*Task 8: Complete four rounds of half a dozen Hatha-Yoga poses daily.

*Rewards:

->A monthly dosage of an A-graded Physical Conditioning Elixir to help the user stabilize his fitness attributes at the S-grading.

-> 150 Juju points.

*Punishment in case the mission is still incomplete after the stipulated time.

->Loss of a monthly dosage of the Physical Conditioning Elixir

->A system penalty of 1500 Juju points

*Remarks: There will be obstacles. There will be hardships. There will be mistakes. But with hard work, there will be no limits on your path to glory.

*Accept *Reject

Zachary had no reason to reject the training mission.

His goal for the offseason was to try his best to improve his attributes. He wanted to hone his football techniques, including his dribbling, passing, and ball control, as much as he could within forty days. After that, he would start mastering the Robinho-step-over juju in preparation for the upcoming football season in Norway. That was why he hurriedly accepted the training mission after it had just popped up on the crystal-like display before him.

"Bzzt Bzzzt! Bzzt Bzzzt!"

It was then that his phone started vibrating from a nearby table. Zachary immediately scooped it up before glancing at the screen. He couldn't help but smile when he noticed that the incoming call was from Camilla.

"Hi, Zach dear," Camilla said from the other end of the line after the call had connected.. "I've been calling you for the past twenty hours, but you've not been picking! Are you okay?" She sounded concerned.

Chapter 307 - Holiday Considerations

"The past twenty hours!" Zachary exclaimed while stealing a peek at his phone's screen. He couldn't help but break out in cold sweat when he noticed that it was already Friday, 20th of December 2013. Moreover, it was already six o'clock in the evening, meaning that he'd spent almost twenty-four hours digesting the A-graded vitality-enhancing elixir. The notion was simply crazy.

"Are you still there, Zach?" Camilla's voice sounded from the phone speakers once again. "Are you doing okay?"

"Yes, I'm okay, Camilla," Zachary hurriedly replied after casting away the irrelevant thoughts from his mind.

"So, what happened? Why haven't you been picking up your phone since yesterday? You had me worried."

"Sorry," Zachary said, taking a moment to organize his words. "You know me when I'm training. I had put my phone in silent mode while exercising yesterday evening. I ended up forgetting about it, and that's why didn't notice your calls."

"Oh!" Camilla said, her tone still a bit doubtful. "Are you sure that everything is okay on your side? You know you can talk to me about anything."

"Don't you worry! Everything is going on fine here. What about you? Are you doing okay?"

"Since you're fine, I'm now also okay," Camila replied, her voice regaining the vibrancy that was typical of her usual self. "Well, it's just that I'm missing you."

"I miss you too," Zachary replied. "But since you're in Trondheim, we can meet any time. Do you want to come over to my place? I'll be cooking salmon, potatoes, and plenty of vegetables for dinner today."

"Of course, I would like to come over," Camilla was quick to reply. "I'll be there in about an hour. So, see you in a bit." She added before hanging up.

Zachary didn't dare dilly-dally. He hurriedly organized the house before starting to prepare dinner.

His cooking skills had improved considerably after a year of living alone. He could prepare most of the more common recipes without any challenges.

So, for the next thirty minutes or so, he worked with haste and the professionalism of a master chef. And soon, the food started blossoming in his kitchen while casting a unique fragrance all over the place. By the time Camilla was ringing the bell, about an hour later, he was already setting up the various mouth-watering dishes on the table.

"Hi, Zach!" Camilla said after she'd walked through the doorway and taken off her overcoat.

"Hi, Camilla," Zachary replied with a smile while giving her a once over. Underneath the overcoat, she'd worn a fitting black dress that underlined her slim waist, shapely hips, and ample bosom. Just by taking a single glance at her, Zachary could feel his heart going on a caper within his chest.

"You look so beautiful today evening," Zachary mumbled with a sigh after a short while.

"Thank you," she said, the corners of her lips lifting into a gorgeous smile.

"How have you been?"

"Okay, but I've been missing you."

Without any more needless words, she jumped into Zachary's open arms.

"I missed you too," Zachary replied, tightening his hands around her. She was so delicate and charming while in his embrace to the point of eliciting some tender feelings within him. He even couldn't stop his body from reacting the way it should when she was that close to him.

"The food is ready," Zachary declared in a hoarse voice, trying his best to clear his mind. "Let's eat first."

"Okay," Camila agreed.

The two of them soon settled on the dining table and started stuffing their stomachs with food. Gradually, the many bowls became slightly more empty as they feasted while discussing various topics. In that manner, the minutes flashed by quickly. And when the clock hand had just pointed to the 8:30 PM mark, they were finishing their dinner.

"Zach," Camilla said just as she was about to put some of the dirty plates into the dishwasher.

"Yes."

"Do you still remember that you promised to go with me on vacation this festive season?"

"Well, yes," Zachary replied, creasing his brows. "However, is it possible to postpone the trip to the end of January? I might not be able to travel now since I'm undergoing a training regimen that is essential to my development as a professional athlete."

Camilla whirled around 180 degrees to hold Zachary's gaze. "It's the offseason," she remarked with a frown. "So, there shouldn't be any team training scheduled these days."

"You're right. I won't be participating in any team training sessions until February. However, I still have to train on my own to improve my skills before next season. You understand that. Don't you, my dear?"

"Naturally," Camilla said with a smile. "However, if it's your own personal training, then you can conduct it anywhere in the world. As long as there are available facilities, your training won't be hindered in any way, even if you're to travel. Isn't that right?"

"Yes, that's right," Zachary concurred. "As long as I have access to good facilities, like well-equipped gyms and good football turfs, then I can train anywhere in the world."

"Ta?da," Camilla said, stepping closer to Zachary. "If that's the case, then why can't we travel somewhere else for the holiday season. Your plans won't be hindered in any way. For instance, if we're to travel to Amsterdam or Barcelona, you can still continue your training by taking advantage of the first-class sports facilities there. Occasionally, you can also take a few hours off to spend time with me. Wouldn't that be great?"

"True, that sounds like a viable plan," Zachary said, falling into a moment of contemplation.

For an entire year, most of his daily routines had revolved around training, eating, sleeping, and playing football within Trondheim City. As a result, he was already fed up with his monotonous lifestyle to some extent. So, that was why the prospect of training in another European city sounded like music to his ears.

"So, where do you wish to go for vacation?" He inquired after a short while.

Camilla's face immediately blossomed into a gorgeous smile. She hooked her arm around Zachary's waist and said, "Barcelona would be a good option. The weather is not so cold there, even during December and January. Additionally, there are a lot of first-rate sports facilities, including gyms, football turfs, and stadiums, all over the city to meet your needs. So, it's the perfect place for us to go on vacation."

"Okay, Barcelona, it is," Zachary said, nodding. "We can book the plane tickets and hotels tomorrow morning and be on our way the following day."

"Excellent," Camilla said, snuggling closer to Zachary. "I'm really looking forward to this trip."

"Me, too."

Chapter 308 - Off-Season Training While On Vacation

As planned, Zachary and Camilla boarded a plane to Barcelona in the morning two days later. After getting off the plane and going through the customs, they took a taxi cab from the airport. Soon, they were well on their way to the Hilton Barcelona Hotel located in the Avinguda Diagonal.

Zachary's heart throbbed with excitement as he looked at the buildings and towering historic monuments flashing by the cab window. He'd already done his research before embarking on the trip to Barcelona with Camilla. So, he was looking forward to his next few days within the historic Spanish city.

Barcelona was a city that contained both the authentically historic and the wildly bizarre. From the scenic trails of the colorful Park Güell to the romantic narrow alleys of Barri Gòtic, then from the beachside nightclubs to the city's dozens of sacred churches and architectural marvels, this city by the sea seemed to attract all types of tourists. Whether you were an adventurer, a couple, a party animal, a culture lover, and more — you could find a variety of things to do within Barcelona City.

However, what had caught Zachary's attention the most were the various world-class sports facilities located within the boundaries of the city. Be it first-class gyms, large stadiums, small turfs, and swimming pools — you could find them all spread everywhere in the city. If there was a need for first-rate sports trainers, you could also find them all over the place. Thus, Barcelona was like heaven to a sports-loving person, like Zachary.

Actually, Zachary's decision to head to Barcelona for a holiday wasn't just to spend time with Camilla or conduct some personal training away from Trondheim. He also wanted to experience the football culture in the city, which many deemed one of the best across the whole world.

"Look! That's the Camp Nou Stadium!" The taxi driver slowed down a little before pointing to a gigantic structure far off in the distance. Even though he was a typical Spaniard, his English was fluent.

"That's the home ground of Barcelona FC, the best football club in the world," the taxi man continued in an excited tone. "Many of the best footballers in history, including Ronaldinho, Rivaldo, Samuel Eto, and Johan Cruyff, all played here. In the current generation of the team, we now have Lionel Messi, Andrés Iniesta, Neymar, and many others — who are among the best of the best in today's game."

"When is Barcelona's next game?" Zachary asked after hearing the driver introduce the local team.

"Sunday, 5th of January," the driver was quick to reply. "Barcelona will be facing Elche Football Club at the Camp Nou. If you're still in Barcelona by then, endeavor to watch that game. I can assure you that you won't be disappointed."

"If I'm still in Barcelona, I will try to," Zachary replied.

A few minutes later, the cab arrived at the Hilton Barcelona Hotel. Under the guidance of the hotel staff, Zachary and Camilla quickly checked into a splendid and elegant room on one of the middle floors of the grand hotel.

The room was huge, with a large bed, a comfy sofa, a flat-screen, and a humongous window on one side. It was well-organized, with all the furniture and interior decorations arranged meticulously. It had the sort of ambiance that allowed one to process the transition from a journey to arrival.

"This place is beautiful," Camilla remarked, looking around. "I already like it here. What about you, Zach?"

"It's great," Zachary said with a smile while also surveying the room. "I think I will have a great time here. I do hope they have a good gym and swimming pool here. That would save me the trouble of searching for training facilities elsewhere."

"They do," Camilla said. "They have a first-class gym and a swimming pool here. So, you'll only need to move out when you need to look for the training turfs."

"Then, that'll be great," Zachary said. "I should maybe first go and check out the gym. I don't want to miss my planned training for today."

"Aren't you going to take a rest first?"

"Nope," Zachary replied. "It's just coming to midday. So, I'll survey the gym first and probably undergo some training. I will only rest later in the evening."

Zachary still had to complete a 40-day system mission aimed at helping him to solidify his football techniques. So, even though he'd just arrived in Trondheim, he didn't want to waste any time. He wished to carry on with the training regimen so as to stay on schedule.

"Okay, I understand," Camilla said. She then stepped forward and fell into Zachary's embrace. "However, before you go, shouldn't we take a shower first and then have some lunch?"

"Okay, then," Zachary said, hooking an arm around Camilla's waist as his tone turned ambiguous. "Let's shower first, then. We can also test out the bed and see if it meets the standard of a four-star hotel."

Camilla's face blossomed into a gorgeous smile. "Great," she said. "Come, let's take a shower together."

"Okay."

For the next few days, Zachary fell into a routine. He would wake up long before the sun had risen in the east for training. After an hour or so of intensive workout, he would then feast on a sumptuous breakfast, together with Camilla, before heading to the gym for his weight training.

The Hilton Barcelona Hotel was a four-star hotel with first-class facilities. They were to Zachary's liking. So, he always spent his morning hours either in the gym or at the swimming pool, trying his best to adapt to his improved body fitness.

In the afternoon, he would often head to a nearby turf. While there, he would spend hours working with the ball or running cone drills. He would then go through a yoga session before ending his training for the day.

Day in, day out, Zachary worked extra hard since he desired to improve his skills before the Europa League game against Fiorentina. He only took a break in the evenings when he accompanied Camilla to various tourist attractions in Barcelona.

And after spending an enjoyable night with Camilla, he would once again restart his training early in the morning the following day, and the cycle would go on.

The days flashed by quickly as Zachary trained himself. Christmas came and went — and before he knew it, the New Year had arrived with regal ease.

After a night's talk with Camilla on one particular day, Zachary decided to extend his holiday in Barcelona by a few weeks. He was reluctant to go back to Trondheim since he really liked the warmer weather in Barcelona and the first-class facilities around the city. So, he'd decided to head back to Norway only after he'd acclimatized to his new fitness attributes.

Four weeks later.

Barcelona was a city of both mild and cold temperatures in January. However, on this particular day, the sunset in the sky was as fresh as the colors brushed upon an artist's canvas. It was so warm and beautiful to the point of warming even the coldest of souls from within.

Under the glare of the setting sun, Zachary sat alone on the training turf as he observed a group of young boys and girls training in the distance. He was slightly out of breath since he'd been working with the ball and running cones for the past two hours. However, he was excited since he'd again managed to push all his stats to the A+ grading.

"System," he commanded inwardly after making sure that there wasn't any other person close to his position. "Show me my football technique stats."

"Command received," the apathetic voice of the system's AI sounded immediately after as the familiar crystal-like display manifested before him. "The user's football technique attributes will be coming up on the system interface in a bit."

"Great."

Zachary grinned as he pivoted his attention onto the translucent screen before him. Without further ado, he started perusing through his football technique attributes.

*USER STATS

->Soccer Technique: (Av. Rating: A+)

Ball Control: A+

Dribbling Skills: A+

Passing Accuracy: A+

Body Control: S-

Zachary's felt like he'd unloaded a couple of weights off his shoulders after glancing at his technique attributes. At long last, he'd managed to overcome the side effects of consuming the S-graded vitality-enhancing elixir.

Moreover, he had a feeling that he might advance some of his football-technique attributes to the S-grading before February. By then, he would be a monster on the pitch — who would be able to take on even the best defenders in the world. So, he could hardly contain his excitement at that moment.

"I guess it's the right time for me to master the Robinho-step-over Juju," he decided after closing the system interface. Without further ado, he chose to act right away.

Zachary immediately packed his training gear before returning to his hotel room. He had the place to himself for the next few hours since Camilla was attending some fashion show that evening. So, he

wasn't worried that she would return abruptly and interrupt him while in the process of learning the new skill.

"System, I would like to purchase the Robinho-step-over juju," he said after settling down on the sofa in the hotel room. His body, which was slightly slimmer than before, was only wrapped in a towel since he'd just taken a shower. His muscles, from the chest down to the abdomen, were well-streamlined. They exuded a feeling of both power and flexibility.

"Command received," the AI replied after a moment. "The user needs to spend 2000 Juju points to purchase the Robinho-step-over Juju from the system shop. Does the user still wish to purchase the skill at that cost?"

"Positive," Zachary replied.

"Command confirmed..." the AI's apathetic voice sounded.

"Checking skill's requirements before confirming the purchase..."

"The user possesses S- grade body control and S- grade agility which meets the requirements of the new skill."

"DING"

"Congratulations. The system has now confirmed the skill purchase from the system shop at the cost of 2000 Juju points.. The user can choose to master the skill at any time."

Chapter 309 - Learning The Step-Over Juju

Zachary had been eyeing the Robinho-step-over Juju for a long time. That was because he would acquire the ability to break through opponents with just a few body feints and step-overs after mastering the skill. He would turn into the perfect ball wizard that could make adversaries tremble in fear if they chanced upon him on the field of play. So, there was no need to make any deliberations before choosing to learn the skill at that moment.

"System," he mumbled, rubbing his hands together in anticipation. "I would like to start learning the skill right away."

"DING"

"Command received," the AI intoned. "The user is attempting to learn a G.O.A.T Skill that requires both mental and physical conditioning before achieving initial mastery."

"To commence the required mental conditioning, the user needs to spend four Juju points to activate the G.O.A.T Skills Simulator for two hours."

"Okay. I would like to undergo the mental conditioning right away. So, go ahead and deduct the Juju points required to activate the simulator."

"DING"

"You have spent four Juju points to activate the system's simulator for a total of two hours. The system's virtual reality simulation will commence in two minutes. Please lie down and ready yourself for the procedure."

Zachary didn't experience any emotional fluctuations since he'd already experienced the conditioning back—when he was learning the Bend-it-like-Beckham Juju.

He first ensured that he'd locked his hotel room door before closing the curtains and lying down on the sofa in a supine position. He then emptied his mind while waiting for the two minutes to elapse. When the countdown was over, new words started filling up the system interface positioned at an oblique angle just before his face.

G.O.A.T Skills Simulator Activating...

Connecting System Neural Interface...

ACTIVATION SUCCESSFUL

Zachary's senses blurred for a bit after the last system message appeared on the screen. His consciousness grew fuzzier, giving him an impression of traversing through thick static. Then with a slight jolt, his awareness sharpened as he descended into a new reality. Once again, he'd arrived in the virtual reality space of the system simulator.

"DING"

The system notification sounded as a few words populated the interface that'd followed his consciousness into the virtual reality.

*G.O.A.T Skills Simulator

Mental Conditioning Exercises Initiating...

Robinho-Step-Over Juju training packages loading...

Select the type of field and the setting to begin training the technique.

a) Training ground without opponents, Artificial Turf.

b) Training ground with opponents, Artificial Turf.

c) Real match setting on GrassMaster Surface.

d) Real match setting on Natural Turf.

NB: For better results, the user should spend a minimum of twenty hours training under each option.

Zachary naturally selected the first option on the list. Since it was his first time training step-overs, he'd decided to take it easy by first familiarizing himself with the skill on the artificial turf without opponents. He would then consider training with the other options after attaining initial mastery over the technique.

"DING"

The system notification rang in his ears immediately after his forefinger left the screen. A perfect green soccer pitch soon started forming beneath his feet. Before long, it spread out and covered more ground in the formerly dark virtual space.

Soon, a vivid 3D image of Robinho, in Brazil's yellow and blue colors, came into being a few yards away from him. In front of him, on the green, were ten balls and a row of cones arranged meticulously to form a basic dribbling drill.

The Brazilian shook his head as if he wasn't satisfied with the set-up. He then waved his hands dismissively as a pair of weights appeared around his ankles.

However, that seemed not to satisfy him. He repeated the gesture, and Zachary immediately felt a pair of weights weighing down on his ankles. By his estimate, the ankle weights were each about 2 Kgs.

Zachary could now tell that the system was just about to simulate a real step-over training scenario. So, he remained attentive as he watched the Brazilian ready himself to commence the drill. He was eager to master the step-over technique as quickly as possible.

The Brazilian didn't dilly-dally for long. He soon started dribbling one of the balls through the rows of cones while wearing the ankle weights. His steps were steady, and his control squeaky-clean as he weaved in and out of the cones. And before long, he'd already done about five repetitions of the dribbling cone drills.

Zachary was surprised by the Brazilian's high-level body control and agility, especially since he was wearing ankle weights. Even though it was just a basic cone drill, it should have been more taxing with the additional burden to his ankles. However, the Brazilian just carried on with the monotonous exercise for the next ten minutes without showing any signs of fatigue. He was like a short cyborg as he worked tirelessly with the ball.

"Your turn," the Brazilian said after completing yet another set of the cone drill. Without waiting for a response, the 3D image shimmered slightly before swiftly moving towards Zachary and merging with his silhouette.

The next moment, Zachary lost control of his body. He could perceive his surroundings and feel his body, but he wasn't in command. It was as if Robinho's 3D image had possessed him.

"Let's begin," he heard himself mumble.

Without wasting a second, he started going through a cone drill similar to the one Robinho had been performing only a few minutes ago. Even with the weights burdening his ankles, he didn't make any mistakes while performing the exercise.

Zachary then understood the whole point of the exercise. At that moment, he was experiencing firsthand how Robinho felt and controlled his body while training his step-overs. Thus, he wouldn't deviate from the correct path with those experiences from Robinho, himself, as the guide.

The minutes flashed by quickly as Zachary trained within the simulator's virtual reality space. He went from one routine to the next until he finally started working with the ball.

At that moment, the option of training without opponents within the simulator could no longer appeal to him. So, he chose to face off against opponents to increase his training efficiency after a few more minutes of dribbling drills. It was then that he experienced firsthand how Robinho felt when beating opponents using his step-over skills.

With a couple of sidesteps and a slight change of his center of gravity, he could send the opponent the other way while breaking through the opposite direction. Beating defenders was just that simple if one managed to master Robinho's step-over skills and his flip-flap playing style.

Zachary could hardly contain his delight when he pictured himself using the step-overs and quick feints to break through opponents the following season. He was confident that he would find it easy to achieve perfect mastery over the technique by relying on his physique and incredible body fitness. After that, it would be his time to shine.

With his S-graded agility and body control, he would render opponents helpless and cut through defenses like a sharp knife through vegetables. Only a minute fraction of defenders active in the world would be able to contain him whenever he was on the ball. He was really looking forward to the future.

"DING"

The system notification sounded just after he had gone through another routine of training his step-overs within the system's virtual space.

"The user has completed the first two of the one hundred hours of mental conditioning required to achieve initial mastery in the Robinho-step-over Juju," the system AI intoned. "For better efficiency, the user is advised to go through two hours of physical conditioning in reality first—before returning to the simulator."

Zachary immediately opened the G.O.A.T Skills menu on hearing the AI's notification. As expected, his mental conditioning progress for the Robinho-step-over Juju had gone up from 0% to 2% after undergoing training for two hours in the simulator. Thus, he would be able to complete all the necessary mental conditioning if he underwent ninety-eight more hours of targeted training within the system's virtual space.

The only downside was that he needed to undergo similar training routines for the technique on actual training grounds in reality. Otherwise, he would turn into an athlete of theory who mastered all the knowledge about the skill in virtual space but still failed to execute it in genuine competitive matches.

And what was the benefit of having a skill that he couldn't utilize in matches?

There was simply no benefit. That being the case, Zachary was determined to put in all the required hard work, both in reality and within the simulator, so that he could achieve perfect mastery over the skill. Only then would he be able to make the step-over Juju his own and use it in matches as if it was an inborn talent.

"System," Zachary said after a moment of consideration. "Do you have an estimate of how long I need to master the skill if I was to start undergoing four hours of targeted training in reality on a daily basis?"

"The user already possesses S-graded body control and physical fitness attributes. So, the user will only require three months to master the skill by training for four hours on a daily basis."

"However..." the AI continued. "The user is advised to increase the daily training time to six hours for better efficiency. The user can also rely on the A-graded physical-conditioning-elixir to achieve better results."

"So, how long will I need to master the skill if I train for six hours daily and also consume the A-graded elixir?"

"One and a half months," the system AI replied.

"One and half months!"

Zachary couldn't help but frown as he sunk into a moment of contemplation. It was already close to the end of January, meaning that he only had about a month to spare before playing against Fiorentina in the Europa League round of thirty-two. So, he was not in the best of moods since he understood that he couldn't utilize the step-over Juju in that crucial fixture for his team.

"System," Zachary called out to the AI. "Is there any way to shorten the time needed to master the skill even further?"

"Negative," the AI responded right away. "The shortest time possible to master the skill after factoring in all the user's attributes and available elixirs is one and half months. There is no way around it unless the user makes another breakthrough in one of his core attributes."

"So, be it," Zachary said, letting out a breath of pent-up air. He would have to rely on his other skills against Fiorentina since he wouldn't have mastered the step-over Juju by the time of the fixture. However, Zachary wasn't that worried since his agility and strength had already broken through to the S-grading. He could easily face off against the Fiorentina by relying just on his speed and power.

Chapter 310 - End Of The Off-Season

Another three weeks quickly flashed by as Zachary continued his personalized training. He was alone in Barcelona since Camilla had chosen to return to Trondheim two weeks ago to honor her work duties. So, he'd already started spending more time practicing either in the gym or on the training grounds. His determination to improve himself before the new season was just that incredible.

A few days ago, he'd once again made a breakthrough in his training and managed to elevate his ball-control attribute to the S-grading. Additionally, he could feel that his dribbling skills were improving at an astounding rate as he underwent targeted practice to grasp the Robinho-step-over Juju.

However, no matter how much he trained, he still couldn't speed up the rate at which he mastered the step-over skill itself.

For the past four weeks, he'd spent many hours training either in the system's simulator or on the training turfs in Barcelona. He'd been very dedicated the entire time and had always made sure to train his side-stepping and feinting skills on a daily basis. Be that as it may, his mental conditioning progress for the Robinho-step-over Juju had only just hit the 70% mark while his physical conditioning was a bit behind, at 60%. Thence, he had to undergo targeted training for 20 to 30 more days before mastering the skill and making it his own.

He was really short on time since the match against Fiorentina in the Europa League round of thirty-two was just ten days away. However, he still decided to continue training and honing his skills until the Rosenborg management recalled him to Trondheim for the new season.

On this day, the sun bloomed as usual on the horizon as it cast golden petals that stretched ever outwards into the rich blue. Dawn had once again descended onto Barcelona City with a new freshness of the morning.

On one of the small streets near the Hilton Barcelona Hotel, Zachary was jogging at a constant pace. He was slightly out of breath and already sweating buckets since he'd been running for the past forty minutes. However, he persisted and continued pushing himself until he arrived at the hotel entrance a few minutes later.

"Welcome back," a voice of a young lady sounded from beside him just as he'd walked through the entrance of the Hilton Barcelona Hotel.

"Thank you, Gabriela," Zachary replied with a smile on his face since he was familiar with the lady. She was one of the receptionists who worked the early morning shift at the hotel. She was professional and had helped Zachary complete several chores over the past four weeks. So, he had quite a good impression of her.

"How was your morning run?" Gabriella asked with a smile.

"Fulfilling," Zachary replied with a single word.

"That's great." She smiled. "Should I send your breakfast up to your room, or will you eat from the restaurant?"

"Send it to my room," Zachary said.

"Okay, then. I'll have someone bring you breakfast in about 30 minutes. If you need anything else, please call reception."

"Thank you," Zachary said. He then made some more small talk with the beautiful receptionist before taking the elevator and making his way to his room on the eighth floor.

After arriving in his room, he went through a five-minute stretching routine to cool down his muscles before taking a quick shower. He then donned a new fresh tracksuit before settling down on his bed and starting to browse the sports news on his laptop.

There was a lot of hype about the upcoming 2014 World Cup on the internet. Many football enthusiasts were starting to speculate that Brazil might win the tournament for the sixth time since it was the host nation this year. However, Zachary just scoffed at the sheer mention of the notion. With his knowledge from the future, he was sure that the Germans would steal the show and win their 4th World Cup title. Nevertheless, all that had nothing to do with him since his home country had not qualified for the competition. So, he just carried on browsing the sports news at a leisurely pace until his breakfast arrived a few minutes later.

Breakfast at the hotel was simply lavish. The meal included a sandwich, fried eggs served over potatoes, lots of fruit, plus milk tea and freshly-squeezed orange juice. What could Zachary say? The food was just simply to his liking. So, he wasted no time digging in and stuffing himself with the various dishes.

"Bzzt Bzzzt! Bzzt Bzzzt!"

Suddenly, his phone started vibrating from a nearby table just as he was about to finish his breakfast. On picking it up and glancing at the screen, he noticed that the call was from Coach Johansen. So, without losing a second, he tapped the accept button and held the phone against his ear.

"Hello, coach," he said after clearing his throat. "How's your morning?"

"My morning is fine, Zachary," the coach replied from the other end of the line. "What about you? How are you doing?"

"I'm doing okay and training as usual."

"That's good to know. Are you still in Barcelona?"

"Yes," Zachary replied.

"We're playing Fiorentina on the 20th of Feb," the coach said. "That is just ten days from now. So, we'll start serious preparations for the match tomorrow."

"Oh, okay," Zachary said. "I'll book a flight back to Norway right away. I should be in Trondheim tomorrow afternoon."

"That's great," Coach Johansen said, his voice growing more vibrant. "We'll talk more when you arrive tomorrow. Have a safe journey."

"Thanks, coach. But just one moment."

"Yes, Zachary!"

"Did you manage to assess those three players that I previously mentioned?"

"Yes, I did," Coach Johansen was quick to reply. "As you had said, they were all players filled with potential. So, I fought very hard to sign the three of them. But in the end, we managed to acquire the services of only two of them."

"One is the Japanese forward, Takumi Minamino, who has been playing for Cerezo Osaka," the coach continued. "He's a fluid attacker that can move freely while on the pitch and unlock the opposing defense with the right pass at the right moment."

"The second player we've managed to sign is Karl Toko Ekambi. He's still a bit rough around the edges. But we can still use him as a winger since he possesses incredible pace and good footwork. The two players have already arrived in Trondheim and are already training with the team."

"That's great," Zachary said excitedly. "Thanks, coach, for strengthening the team once again."

Zachary was simply glad that Rosenborg had gone ahead and acquired the signature of those two players. That was because they were footballers who'd achieved an adequate measure of success during his previous life.

Takumi Minamino had gone on to play for big clubs such as Red Bull Salzburg, Liverpool, and Southampton. On the other hand, Karl Toko Ekambi had quickly grown into a powerful forward who played for clubs such as Villarreal and Lyon. For sure, they were players filled with an immense amount of potential, and as long as they were given an opportunity, they would shine.

Many more attacking options had just opened up after Rosenborg acquired their signatures. As a result, the team would no longer need to rely just on himself and Nick to score goals.

"Zachary," the coach said from the other side of the line after a moment. "You really surprised me once again. It's as if you are a natural-born scout who can always spot players filled with potential. I would have surely employed you as a scout here at Rosenborg if you weren't an incredible footballer yourself."

Zachary suppressed a chuckle. "I was just lucky to spot the two players on one of their good days when they were playing for their respective clubs."

"If you say so," the coach said. "By the way, Zachary. Have you considered switching to a smaller jersey number?"

"Not at all. I still like my number-33."

"Why?"

"It has three in it, which tallies with one of the numbers in my birth date."

"When is your birthday?"

"3rd of December."

"Oh, then we should maybe consider offering you the number-3 jersey," the coach said, his tone humorous.

"And then will you also play me as a left-back?"

"That would be a waste of your talents." Coach Johansen remarked. "Anyways: For marketing purposes, the management has proposed to offer you either shirt number-8 or shirt number-10. Those numbers match your role on the team more perfectly. So, which option will you choose?"

"Can I keep my number-33?"

"That isn't an option."

"Then, I guess I'll have to go with the number-8," Zachary said after a moment of contemplation. There was no way he could refuse both options since changing to a smaller shirt number was one of the terms of the contract extension he'd signed with Rosenborg. He could at least afford to give up some preferences, especially since the club was already paying him a monthly income of 1.2 million NOK without factoring in match bonuses.

"Number-8 is a good number," the coach commented. "The fans will surely love it."

"I guess so."

"Okay, Zachary," the coach said after a moment. "Let me leave you to prepare so that you can return to Trondheim as soon as possible. We'll talk more when you arrive. Have a safe journey."

"Thanks, coach," Zachary replied before ending the call.