

Greatest 311

Chapter 311 - The Nike Deal

Zachary took a flight to Trondheim early the following morning. He was feeling very refreshed, especially after spending close to two months on vacation in Barcelona. He'd gone on various tour trips around the historical city and trained arduously to elevate most of his core attributes to the S-grading. The only regret was not meeting and training with high-profile Barcelona FC stars like Lionel Messi. Otherwise, the trip would have been more fulfilling.

As it was only the second week of February, Trondheim was still experiencing winter. As a result, Zachary could not help but shudder when he stepped off the plane at Værnes Airport. It was as if he'd just strolled into a freezer when the chilling breeze brushed across his skin.

"What a huge contrast with Barcelona!"

Zachary sighed and shook his head before tightening his jacket around him. Without any dilly-dallying, he slung his gym bag over his shoulder before slowly making his way towards the arrivals section of the airport.

As it was just coming to midday, the human traffic within the hallways of the airport was at acceptable levels. That was because most planes arrived either early in the morning or late in the evening. So, Zachary quickly completed all the necessary procedures before picking up the rest of his luggage and heading towards the airport's exit.

He was looking forward to getting back to his apartment as soon as possible and having a good rest afterward. That way, he would be able to do away with the jetlag and be in proper shape for the team training the following day. However, not everything would always go according to one's wishes.

After Zachary had just strolled through the airport's exit, his phone suddenly started vibrating. He fished it out of his jacket pocket and glanced at the screen.

The call was from Emily, his agent. So, without losing a second, he pressed the accept button and pressed it next to his ear.

"Hello, Emily," he said.

"Hello, Zach," Emily's voice sounded from the phone's speaker a moment later. "Have you arrived in Trondheim yet?"

"Yes. You called me when I was just about to depart from the airport."

"That's good," Emily said, her voice taking on a relaxed tone. "Can we meet?"

"Right now?"

"Yes, as soon as possible," she said. "We have a few issues to discuss, and they surely can't wait."

"Oh, okay," Zachary said. "But you need to give me about an hour since I have to drop my luggage at my apartment first. Is that okay?"

"Yes, that's fine," Emily replied from the other end of the line. "Let's meet at Café le Frère at 2:00 PM. I'll be waiting for you there."

"Okay, then," Zachary said. "See you at 2:00 PM."

"Try to be on time."

"I will," Zachary replied before ending the call. He then quickly boarded a taxi back to his apartment.

Traffic was light on the roads in Trondheim at midday. So, Zachary managed to reach his apartment in only thirty minutes. He then took a shower before preparing some instant noodles for lunch. When the clock hand was pointing to the 1:30 PM mark, he'd already finished eating.

Without further ado, he locked his apartment before taking a cab to Trondheim Square.

"You're quite early!" Emily said as soon as he settled in a seat opposite hers at a corner table within Café le Frère. She was as elegant as ever, in a tight-fitting sweater that matched the dark brown shade of her silk-like wavy hair.

Zachary's face lit up into a smile. "Of course, I had to be early, especially after receiving your call," he said. "How have you been?"

"I'm doing okay, and everything is moving forward smoothly," she said, beaming. "What about you? How was your stay in Barcelona? Did you have a wonderful vacation?"

"Yes, I did," Zachary replied. "You should also try going there sometime."

"I have already been to Barcelona more than a dozen times," Emily said while suppressing a chuckle.

"Oh! I almost forgot that you agents are always traveling everywhere in the world," Zachary said with a sigh while calling the waiter over. He was still hungry despite having eaten some noodles at home. So, he decided to order some food as he discussed business with his agent.

After the waiter had stepped away with their orders, Emily got down to business. "The Nike endorsement deal has finally come through," she said suddenly. "I've already finished negotiating terms with the Nike representatives, and they're ready to take you on as their ambassador."

"Wow!" Zachary exclaimed, his heart starting to race with excitement. "When did this happen?"

"I met with the representatives yesterday in the afternoon," Emily replied with a smile. "We then quickly drew up an agreement since they were searching for young players with potential around Europe. However, they are short on time and need to know your stand before the end of the week. That's the reason why I wanted to meet with you as soon as possible."

"Oh, okay," Zachary said after letting out a breath. "How are the terms they are offering?"

"Very good," Emily replied, fishing out a document from her handbag. "For the start, Nike is ready to pay you an annual income of 600,000 Euros if you sign a 3-year endorsement agreement with them."

"Additionally," Emily continued. "They've added a lot of clauses in the contract which encourage your personal growth as a football player. For instance, they have promised to increase your annual wage to 1.2 million Euros if you manage to win the Europa League this year. And if it so happens that you join a big club in one of the top leagues after winning the Europa League, then they will increase your income to 1.5 Million a year."

"Zachary! These are Euros, not Norwegian Kroners we're discussing. They're the big bucks that only exist in the fantasies of most athletes around the world. So, if I were in your shoes, I would not deliberate for long before accepting the deal."

"Oh, okay," Zachary said, trying his best to hold down his excitement. The deal had come at the right time when he was in need of money.

Miss Heather Miller, Zachary's newly-hired investment consultant, had already set up a brokerage account in his name. Using her connections, she'd also managed to secure a channel through which he could buy many shares from fast-growing companies, like Tesla and Xiaomi Inc.

Thus, Zachary was already ready to start making investments by relying on his future knowledge and the expert guidance of his investment consultant. The only factor that'd been limiting him was his small start-up capital.

However, with the Nike deal finally coming through, he would finally possess more than a million Euros of start-up funds. What would follow would be him rising to prominence in the business world. He could even quickly become a multi-millionaire if he played his cards right.

Aside from raising his football career to the peak, Zachary also wanted to guarantee a very stable future for himself. He wished to secure his destiny by making money as soon as possible in his new life using his future knowledge. That way, he would never run out of cash even if he decided to start living lavishly in the future.

"So, what say you, Zachary?" Emily asked after a moment. "Should I go ahead and agree to the terms of the contract in your stead?"

Zachary grinned. "If the terms are as good as you say, then you can accept the contract. However, I wish to know what sort of responsibilities I need to fulfill after signing the agreement."

"Oh, those are quite straightforward," Emily said, taking a glance at the document within his hands. "As a Nike sponsored athlete, you'll have to take part in their advertisement campaigns at least twice a year."

"Secondly, you'll have to start wearing Nike boots and sports gear whether you are on the pitch or undergoing your private training. Of course, Nike will provide you with their sports gear free of charge."

"Thirdly, you need to actively promote the Nike products that you're using on your social media platforms. For instance, you can post a picture of yourself in Nike boots or a Nike tracksuit every once a month."

"I have already reviewed the whole contract in great detail," she continued. "But I didn't manage to find any terms that are disadvantageous to you. However, to be on the safe side, you can also carefully read through the contract document when you return home. Here! Take it." She handed out the document to him.

"Thanks," Zachary said, receiving the document. "I think you should agree to the terms of the contract in my stead if it's as you say. But when do they want me to put pen on paper?"

"Early next week," Emily replied with a smile. "They have also promised to pay you the 600,000 Euros for this year immediately after the contract signing ceremony. So, we really have no reasons to delay."

"Okay, great," Zachary said with a smile. "Go ahead and do what you have to do. I'll be readily available when the final contract is ready for signing. Otherwise, thanks for the hard work."

"It's my pleasure, Zachary," Emily said, holding Zachary's gaze. "Don't forget that I'll also be earning some good amount of money from this deal. So, there's really no need for any thanks."

Zachary grinned while looking at the various dishes that the waiter had just placed before them. "Shall we eat now," he said. "I'm really starving."

"Okay, then. Let's eat."

Chapter 312 - Fitness Concerns

Zachary woke up early the following morning and headed to Lerkendal. Since he was still in the process of mastering the Robinho-step-over Juju, he wanted to put in a few hours of practice before the actual team training session. However, on reaching the training ground, he noticed that there was someone who'd arrived even earlier than him.

He was surprised after seeing Coach Johansen's lank form standing in the middle of the training ground while glancing far off into the distance. It was as if the coach was a shepherd overlooking his flock. Yet, there were no animals or even people anywhere in the vicinity.

"Coach, you're very early today," Zachary said as he stood next to the coach in the middle of the almost-empty training ground.

The coach slowly inclined his head and smiled at Zachary. "You're finally here," he said. "Welcome back."

"Thanks, coach," Zachary replied. "I actually arrived in Trondheim yesterday. However, I'd to settle some personal issues since I'd been away from my place for about two months. So, I couldn't attend yesterday's team training."

"Don't worry," the coach said. "We only worked on the team member fitness yesterday. Many of your teammates were not training seriously during the off-season. As a result, their fitness wasn't up to par. So, we had to help them get back into tip-top shape before starting the actual work on the tactics against Fiorentina."

"Oh," Zachary said, his brows creasing slightly. He had the high aspiration of helping his team progress further in the Europa League.

However, all that also depended on the strength of his teammates since football was a game of eleven. If their fitness levels were in some way lacking, they would find it hard to perform at their best over the next few days. Then, what would follow would be Rosenborg finding it very hard to beat their next opponents - Fiorentina.

Zachary had watched plenty of Fiorentina's matches over the past two months while on vacation, and his assessment was that the Italian side was on form. Fiorentina had even recently defeated Udinese Calcio before qualifying for the finals of the Italian Cup. They were not an easy team to beat, for sure.

So, unless all the players of Rosenborg could work as a whole and do their best, they would be in for a hard time against such a fierce Italian side. It was a simple—but ugly truth.

"Coach," Zachary said, his tone a bit self-effacing. "Then, when will we start working on the actual tactics? The match against Fiorentina is next week on Thursday. That is just eight days away."

"We should be able to start today," the coach said with a smile. "Don't worry. The team's situation is not as bad as it seems. Aside from you, everyone else arrived a week ago. So, they've been working on their fitness for the past seven days. They're already in good shape and just about ready to begin the actual preparations for the match. You might even find yourself on the bench if your fitness is lacking."

Zachary chuckled. "I'm not worried about being on the bench since I've been working hard on my fitness throughout the off-season. Instead, what worries me is having teammates who aren't at their best. You know football is more enjoyable with great teammates."

"True," Coach Johansen said, nodding. "That's why we've been doing our best to bring the team back into tip-top shape. For those that haven't managed to achieve acceptable levels of fitness by the end of today, we'll drop them. There's no use involving them in our training plans."

"That harsh!" Zachary was surprised.

"Are you worried that we might drop you?" The coach asked with a smile while glancing at Zachary.

"Not at all," Zachary replied with confidence.

"Then, there's nothing to worry about," the coach said. "We have two squads now with almost equal strength. We can easily build a good team around you even with half the players missing."

"Oh, okay, coach," Zachary said, feeling slightly at a loss for words. "I'll start my training now. There are a few aspects of my game that I'm still working on. I hope to refine them before the start of the season."

"Okay, off you go," Coach Johansen said with a dismissive wave of his hand. "I'm looking forward to those new aspects of your game when we play Fiorentina. So, please do your best."

"Thanks, coach," Zachary said. "I can promise that you'll not be disappointed." He added before stepping away from the coach to commence his training.

The weather was cold that day, while the training ground was slippery due to the previous night's precipitation. However, all that didn't dissuade Zachary from training with his usual earnestness.

He quickly set up the cones on one side of the pitch and soon began executing agility and dribbling drills. For the next few minutes, he worked like a maniac without caring about anything around him. He was simply like a robot as he weaved through the cone set-up with the ball glued to his feet.

After completing the cone work, Zachary immediately switched to juggling the ball. For the next dozen or so minutes, he went at it with a hundred percent focus since he was in the process of honing his control and ball skills in order to master the step-over juju.

Although juggling might seem like a simple exercise to amateurs, it was a surefire way for professionals to hone their ball skills. Juggling could build an affinity with the ball and improve timing, spatial understanding, touch, motor coordination, balance, body control, and leg strength while solidifying a player's confidence. That was why many of the brilliant professional players were excellent ball jugglers.

For instance, a phenomenal player like Ronaldinho had spent numerous hours juggling the ball in his earlier years and had honed the skill to an incredible level. He could thus juggle the ball for hours, not just using his feet but with many other parts of his body. As a result, his control and ball skills during matches were at a monstrous level.

Zachary had long understood that a player without excellent ball control would find it hard to become a fantastic dribbler. So, that's why he wasn't the least bit surprised when the system included juggling exercises as part of his physical conditioning routine to learn the step-over skills.

The minutes flashed by quickly, and Zachary soon ended his training. On looking around, he noticed that most of the Rosenborg first-team players had already arrived. They were going through various fitness drills, alone or in small groups, even without the guidance of the coaches.

Among them were two new faces that Rosenborg had just signed. They were Takumi Minamino, a player all the way from Japan, and the young Karl Toko Ekambi from Cameroon. At that moment, the two of them were comfortably going through agilities with Mikael Dorsin and Eric Bailly.

"Seems like these two are already fitting in well." Zachary mused before stepping forward to greet them. He exchanged a few words with them, taking care to welcome them to the team. After that, he started moving around to catch up with the rest of his teammates.

In particular, he spent more time talking to Kasongo and the Otterson brothers, who'd by now firmly secured their positions on the Rosenborg team. The three of them had matured a great deal over the past year. They even had a chance to vie for first-team numbers if they continued working hard.

FWEEEEEEE

The whistle sounded while Zachary was still conversing with Kasongo and the Ottersons. Without further ado, the four of them quickly made their way towards the group of coaches who were at that moment in the center circle.

"Good morning to you all," Coach Johansen said when all the present Rosenborg players had assembled before him. "Today, we'll begin the actual preparations for our Europa League match against Fiorentina. We'll have to work hard over the next seven days as we try to get into shape and refine our tactics for that game."

"Fiorentina is a team currently placed fourth in the Italian League," the coach continued, sweeping his gaze across the players. "They're surely strong opponents with a deep squad that can even cause plenty of problems for European giants like AC Milan and Juventus. So, to win against them, we'll have to play at our best as a team."

"There can be no mistakes! All players have to play their roles flawlessly if we're to have a chance at beating them. And that's why I've decided to select only match-fit players for that game."

"I can assure you that I'll not consider last season's performance when selecting the team. So, even if you're someone who was always a reserve player last season or a new player that has just joined Rosenborg, you'll still get your chance as long as you work hard over the next seven days. As long as you can prove that you're better than the rest on the training ground, then there's no reason for me to leave you out of the squad. Are we together, guys?"

"Yes, coach."

Coach Johansen nodded. "Now that we're on the same page, we can think about starting our training. But first, I would like to test your fitness. Those that I find unfit will not even have the right to participate in today's training. They'll have to first go to the gym and refine their fitness to acceptable levels before they can return here for the tactical training."

A wave of murmurs emanated from the crowd of players after the coach had made his declaration. It seemed like most were not confident in their fitness, especially since they were just from the off-season.

"Quiet," the coach said, his tone commanding. "You're professional players, not some greenhorns in an academy. Staying fit is your most important responsibility as a professional. So, why should I put up with you if you haven't taken care to maintain your fitness levels during the off-season?"

The players immediately quietened down on hearing Coach Johansen's words. The coach was right. An unfit player had no right to play high-level football.. So, they could only swallow down their complaints and hope for the best during the fitness testing.

Chapter 313 - Coach Johansen's Shock

The fitness testing was more rigorous than Zachary had initially expected. It included specialized tests to evaluate a player's body fat content, strength and power, speed and instantaneous sprint ability, agility, plus aerobic fitness. Moreover, since the entire session was overseen by top sports physicians associated with Rosenborg, it was almost like another medical. It demanded a great deal of exertion and concentration from the players and was a hell lot taxing, for sure.

However, since the coach had ordered the testing, not a single person on the training ground dared to complain. The players all quietly stepped forward for the testing since they didn't want to go into the bad books of their coach. One by one, they went through the various tests as the minutes flashed by, and soon it was Zachary's turn.

Zachary stepped forward with confidence when the physician called out his name. At that moment, he wasn't the least bit worried about the fitness tests.

He had already consumed the vitality-enhancing-elixir and honed his fitness to an incredible level during the off-season. As a result, he was sure that he could even outperform most players in top-tier European leagues when comparing body fitness.

"Enter the tactics room where you'll have your body fat content tested," the physician said with an expressionless face.

"Okay," Zachary replied before stepping into the tactics room where some of the physicians had set up their equipment.

The physicians used the skinfold method to measure Zachary's body fat content. In particular, they used calipers to measure the thickness of the skin at a range of sites around his body. That way, they could accurately determine whether there was any excess fat on his body.

But who was Zachary? He was a player that'd spent plenty of hours over the past two months honing his fitness. He was thus as fit as a fiddle and possessed well-streamlined muscles without any excess fat on his body. His lean six-pack physique was like a work of art, exuding power and masculinity. So, could he really fail a body fat content test?

What a joke!

The analogy was simply like stating that a fish couldn't swim.

Zachary, of course, passed the body content test with flying colors. However, he didn't just stop at that. He also went through the aerobic fitness tests, the body-flexibility tests, and the vertical jumps without breaking a sweat. His performance was so eye-catching to the point that most of the physicians started gawking at him with expressions of undisguised wonderment.

"Your fitness levels are off the charts, young man," the old physician said with a smile after noting down Zachary's endurance and vertical jump measurements. "They're the best I've seen here at Rosenborg in

a long time. Keep up the good work, and you might once rise up the ranks to become the best in the world of football."

"Thank you, doctor," Zachary replied humbly. "But, are the tests done?" He asked while looking around. He'd completed the tests without exerting much effort — a feat that really surprised him. He couldn't help but wonder whether those were the same tests that had made the rest of his teammates sweat with trepidation.

"Not yet," the old physician said. His tone was a lot warmer that time around. It seemed that Zachary's performance had truly impressed him. "You can head back to the training ground. Your coaches will conduct the agility and sprinting tests there. I wish you luck."

"Thank you," Zachary replied before stepping out of the testing room and heading back to the training ground. He was looking forward to undergoing the agility and sprinting tests. That was because they could help him determine by how much he'd improved after consuming the elixirs and training like a maniac over the past two months.

Coach Johansen's stood on the sidelines, overseeing his assistants taking the players through the agility and sprinting tests. In his hands was a notebook where he was noting the results of the worst and best players as the testing proceeded forward. He was very meticulous when assessing the players since the two tests of agility and repeat-sprint ability were crucial when determining the actual match fitness of a football player.

Agility included a player's capacity to change direction quickly while in motion. A highly-agile player like Lionel Messi possessed the ability to adapt quickly and easily in response to challenges. He could easily break through defenses with a simple change in direction. That was the true power of agility on the field of play.

On the other hand, Repeat-Sprint ability was the capacity of an athlete to recover and maintain maximal effort during subsequent sprints. It was an attribute considered important to team sports like football. Players with a high level of repeat-sprint ability were monsters on the pitch, especially with regard to work rate. That was because they could chase after the ball and close down opponents repeatedly since they wouldn't tire, even after making repeated sprints within a short time window.

As a coach, Boyd Johansen understood the importance of those two tests. Thus, he'd decided to oversee the two tests himself so as to get a clear handle on all his players' match-fitness levels before including them in his training plans.

Suddenly, the voice of Trond Henriksen, his assistant, sounded from beside him as he was still observing one of the players. "Is it just me, or does Zachary look faster and more agile than last season? He's going through the arrow-head agility drill without exerting much effort. Yet, his time still seems to be significantly ahead of the rest of his teammates."

"Oh," Coach Johansen exclaimed, his heart skipping a beat. Without losing a second, he cast his gaze towards the side of the pitch where Zachary was going through an agility test.

"Huh? How did this Zachary train during the off-season?"

Coach Johansen was astonished. Although he hadn't yet seen the results from the timing gates within the drill set-up, he could still distinguish that Zachary was very fast and highly agile.

Compared to his previous self, who played for Rosenborg last season, he was more monstrous when considering the attribute of speed. The difference was akin to pitting the best time of Usain Bolt against that of Amiya Mallick. There was no need for any comparison, even if it was the same person.

"How could a player improve by that much over a short period of only two months?"

Coach Johansen's mouth was agape as he followed Zachary's movement through the drills. He could tell that the young man had grown considerably in more than one aspect. For instance, his body control and agility attributes had also experienced huge breakthroughs during the off-season. That was why his motions through the arrow-head drill set-up were like moving clouds and flowing water, smooth and mind stirring. There weren't any bits of excess movements even when he cut the sharp corners. He was just that monstrous.

"Trond," Coach Johansen said after watching for a while longer.

"Yes."

"Help me and call Dr. Pederson over. We need to understand whether Zachary has made improvements in the other aspects of his fitness."

"Okay," Trond Henriksen replied with a nod. "I'll call the old doctor right away."

Doctor Eivind Pederson, the aged doctor who'd tested Zachary's other fitness attributes, soon arrived at the scene. Using simple terms that even an amateur could understand, he began presenting Zachary's other fitness measurements.

Coach Johansen at first listened with an obviously stunned expression plastered upon his face. But the more he heard, the more numb he became until he just sighed and shook his head in utter wonderment.

"Doctor, what is really going on here?" Coach Johansen queried after the doctor had finished presenting the results. "Zachary went through a medical at the end of November, right before our match against Molde in the Norwegian Cup final. His fitness wasn't this high at the time. However, only two to three months have passed, yet the results of his fitness test have increased by leaps and bounds. Could he be using performance-enhancing drugs?"

"Careful, careful," Dr. Pederson warned. "I don't think that there is any performance-enhancing drug in the world at the moment that can induce such a stable growth in an athlete. So, the accusation could create a rift between the team and the player if he so happened to hear you. And we wouldn't want that. Would we?"

"I'm sorry," Coach Johansen said, his tone apologetic. "I just lost myself for a moment there due to the shock I was feeling."

"Just be careful," Dr. Pederson said. "Regarding his marked improvement over the past two to three months: I think that he's undergoing a spell of exponential growth during this period. As a result, his fitness attributes are also improving along."

"Many athletes experience this bout of growth, especially within the 18 to 23 year age bracket. For instance, sprinters become faster while footballers grow stronger and more agile during such a period. So, there's no need for us to be surprised."

"Moreover," the physician continued with a smile. "Zachary's fitness measurements show us that he spends a lot of time training his body. That is why all the aspects of his fitness, including body fat content, endurance, agility, strength, and power, are all well balanced and stable for the case of his body. That wouldn't be the case if he occasionally used performance-enhancing drugs."

Coach Johansen nodded after hearing the doctor's explanation. Of course, he didn't believe that Zachary was using performance enhancing-drugs as their positive effects were only short-term. He'd just uttered the statement due to the shock he'd been feeling at that moment.

"This is good for us," he said after getting over his shock.

"Yes, it's good for us," Dr. Pederson agreed. "We should be happy that one of our players has made such a remarkable improvement."

"And if this improvement can translate into real ability on the pitch..." Coach Johansen trailed off while grinning.

"Then, we'll have someone that is almost comparable to a young Messi or Ronaldo here in our team," The doctor completed the coach's sentence also with a grin.

Chapter 314 - Final Preparations For The Europa League

Coach Johansen's face had already morphed into a frown by the time the fitness testing ended. He was really disappointed with his players' lack of professionalism. They'd gone on holiday and ignored their fitness. As a result, their fitness measurements were only so-so, even when only eight days remained to the first-leg of Rosenborg's game against Fiorentina.

Fortunately, not all his first-team players were in bad shape. The likes of Zachary, Nicki, Yerry Mina, Eric Bailly, Thomas Partey, and Mikael Dorsin had all maintained their match fitness, even during the off-season. Thence, Rosenborg could still put together a fairly-strong squad with some additions from the second team and the new signings. So, that was why the coach was not panicking even when he'd decided to expel twelve unfit players from the training ground.

"Coach Johansen!" Trond Henriksen, his assistant, called out from beside him.

"Yes, Trond," Coach Johansen replied without taking his eyes off the pitch. The two of them were still standing on the sidelines as they watched the remaining eighteen players going through passing drills under the glow of the winter setting sun.

"Do we really have to suspend those twelve players?" Trond Henriksen asked, creasing his brows slightly. "With them gone, the depth of our squad will narrow down considerably. So, can't we, at least, leave them on the bench?"

"Why should we?" Coach Johansen countered. "Their fitness is clearly lacking. So, why should we include them in our training plans?"

"Most of them are just barely below the mark," Trond argued. "With just four days of training, they might be able to get back into shape and help us against Fiorentina."

"Trond! You've forgotten one thing. It's not just them on the team. We have many reserve players who have been working hard throughout the off-season while silently hoping for a chance to play for Rosenborg. They're now in tip-top shape and ready to perform. Should I leave them on the bench and instead field players who can't be bothered to maintain their fitness?"

Coach Johansen's tone was sharp as he inclined his head slightly to face his assistant. Yes, he understood that he'd just suspended twelve regulars from the squad, and among them were three players who were often on the starting line-up. However, why the need to worry? With the new signings, Takumi Minamino and Karl Toko Ekambi, plus a couple of rising talents, like Paul Kasongo and Paul Otterson, the squad would remain strong, even without the suspended players.

"Coach, I was just considering the depth of the team," Trond said. "We might need more experience while facing a strong team like Fiorentina."

"We still have plenty of experienced players on the squad," Coach Johansen said with a smile. "There is Mikael, Tore, Nicki, and Zachary on the team. Adding on the likes of Yerry Mina, Eric Bailly, and Thomas Partey — then we have got enough depth in our squad. As long as we play our cards right, we'll be able to give Fiorentina a run for their money."

"Oh, okay," the assistant said, seemingly not convinced.

"Just relax," Coach Johansen said to assure him with a dismissive wave of his arm. "Everything will work out fine. Moreover, with the suspended players as examples, it'll be easy for us to establish team discipline later on—in the future. The players will also become more hardworking since they're now aware that they can easily face suspensions if they don't meet the team standards."

"I understand," Trond said.

"Good," Coach Johansen replied with a smile. "I'm glad we're on the same page. So, let's work well together to prepare the team for the game against Fiorentina during the next seven days."

"Coach, you have my support, no matter the circumstances," Trond replied, also with a smile. "You deserve that, at least for helping Rosenborg win a double last year."

"Thank you."

Over the following four days, the team's progress elicited a sense of satisfaction within Coach Johansen. He was always in a good mood since the players worked harder than ever while preparing for the game against Fiorentina. They arrived early at the training ground and left late in the evening as they worked, day in and day out, on the various aspects of their in-game talents.

In particular, Zachary was as diligent as ever. Coach Johansen would always find him honing his ball skills whenever he arrived on the field early in the morning. And whenever there was a break in the team practice during the course of the day, the coach would see the boy prodigy move to the side to continue training. It was also the same during the evening after the team sessions.

Training, training, and training even harder, from early morning to late evening — that was how he spent the following four days.

Coach Johansen had more than once thought about advising the boy prodigy against overworking himself. However, after recalling how the boy prodigy could elevate his fitness to monstrous levels within less than three months, he decided against the notion. Since he could make such improvements

while training by himself, he knew his body well from the inside out. So, there was no need to meddle with his training.

On Sunday, just four days before the Europa League fixture, Coach Johansen organized a friendly match against Ranheim IL, a local club in Norway. He intended to get his team match-ready before facing off against the Italian side.

Coach Johansen didn't include Zachary and Nicki in the match-squad since he was aware that they were already match-fit. Be that as it may, Rosenborg still managed to thrash Ranheim with a score of 3:1 at Lerkendal, with goals coming in from Paul Kasongo, Borek Dockal, and Alexander S?derlund.

It was a commanding win that caused Coach Johansen to smile for hours.

All the Rosenborg players had worked perfectly together, like gears of a perfect machine, to overwhelm the Ranheim side. In particular, Paul Kasongo, a young player that graduated from the academy only the previous year, put up an incredible display that shocked many. He managed to score the first goal in the 10th minute and set up the third in the late stages of the second half.

The two new signings, Takumi Minamino and Karl Toko Ekambi, also left a deep impression on Coach Johansen during the friendly match. In addition to being hardworking, they were also skilled players who could handle the ball ingeniously on the pitch. Moreover, their passing, positioning and shooting skills were more than textbook perfect, making them ideal forward players for any team. They were simply that good.

Coach Johansen was once again overwhelmed by Zachary's scouting skills. The coach couldn't understand how such a training maniac had spotted those two talented players, even when they were playing for obscure clubs. Either Zachary was a genius when scouting players, or he had a team of top scouts working for him. But whatever the case, Coach Johansen was glad that Zachary had helped Rosenborg acquire two more talented players. So, he didn't spend time thinking about the issue for long.

After the friendly game, the Rosenborg players continued training as they slowly by slowly honed their tactics for the upcoming Europa League fixture. Be it set-pieces, positioning, and player movements

when on and off the ball — they worked on them with a one-track mind under the guidance of the coaches. In that way, the days flashed by — and soon, it was Wednesday, February 19, 2014, the eve of the match between Rosenborg and Fiorentina.

On that evening, when the sun was just about to sink below the horizon in the west, Coach Johansen announced the end of training and called the players to the tactics room.

It was finally the time for the pre-match tactical meeting. The players were all excited since they would be playing competitive football for the first time in more than two months. So, they didn't dilly-dally in the slightest as they headed to the tactics room to listen to their coach.

"Good evening to you all," Coach Johansen said after all the players had settled down in the seats around the tactics room. "For the last eight days, we've been honing our tactics for our Europa League game against Fiorentina. And tomorrow evening will be the day when we finally use those tactics to crush our opponents. Are you guys ready?"

"Yes, coach," the players replied with zest.

"Good." The coach nodded before going through a bit of the game plan for the following day.

For the next few minutes, he talked about the opponents and their weaknesses before explaining how to exploit those flaws for Rosenborg's own good. He was clear and very detailed as he spoke; giving an impression that he'd researched the opponents - Fiorentina to a great extent. The seconds flashed by in that way, and soon, he got to the part of announcing the squad.

"Let's move on to the squad," Coach Johansen announced with a smile. "As I already explained, we'll be playing with a 4-3-3 formation against Fiorentina. For those who don't understand formations, that means four defenders, three midfielders, and three attackers." He added seriously.

The players laughed at that.

"In goal, we'll have Daniel Rørlund, our veteran keeper, while in defense; we'll have Mikael Dorsin, Tore Reginiussen, Yerry Mina, and Eric Bailly."

"In midfield, we'll have Thomas Partey, Zachary Bamba, and Takumi Minamino in a triangular formation. Zachary and Takumi will play as attacking midfielders, while Thomas will be the lone-holding midfielder."

"The forwards will be Nicki Nielsen, Borek Dockal, and Alexander Söderlund. Nicki will play as the central striker, while Borek and Alexander will attack through the flanks. That's it for the starting eleven."

"Moving on," the coach continued after sweeping his gaze over the tactics room. "On the bench, we'll have a total of seven players. The names of the selected players are Lund Hansen, William Troost-Ekong, Cristian Gamboa, Ole Selnes, Jonas Svensson, Karl Toko Ekambi, and Paul Kasongo. That is it for the entire squad."

"Any questions?" The coach asked while glancing around.

All the players remained silent.

"If there are no questions, then let's end today's tactical meeting here," the coach said. "Be sure to arrive at Lerkendal by midday tomorrow. That'll give us a few more hours to prepare for the game that is scheduled to commence at 7:00 PM. Otherwise, I wish you a good evening."

Chapter 315 - The As Steady As A Rock Fiorentina

Lerkendal was literally on fire the following evening.

By 6:00 PM, the overenthusiastic fans had long filled up all the seats in the stadium. They were already singing like a group of maniacs even when there was still an hour to kick-off. It was as if the entire place was experiencing an earthquake as their voices reverberated like thunder across the stadium. For sure, they were very excited and looking forward to that evening's Europa League game between Rosenborg and Fiorentina.

"Testing, one two... testing, one..."

Suddenly, another loud sound accompanied by some static cut across the din as the loudspeakers around the entire stadium came alive.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen," the voice of Kjell Roar, the commentator for the day, sounded next as the cheers in the stadium reduced in volume. "Welcome to Lerkendal for today's highly-anticipated Europa League game between Rosenborg Ballklub and ACF Fiorentina."

"This is the Europa League's round of thirty-two stage. It's the knock-out phase where the two teams will face off against each other and decide the result after two legs. Then, the team with the highest aggregate score will qualify for the round of sixteen while the loser will have to go back home crying."

"If the two teams can't beat the other and only manage a tie even after the two legs, then the away goal rule will apply. The team that scores more goals away from home will win if the total goals scored by each team are otherwise equal. If even the away goal rule can't determine the winner, then the teams will play extra time and later on take penalties."

"Today evening, the Rosenborg players have to win the game and also prevent Fiorentina from scoring if they wish to qualify for the next round. Otherwise, they'll be in for a very tough battle when they head to Florence, Italy, next week for the second leg."

"Ladies and gentlemen," the commentator continued. "Seated with me here is Harald Bratbakk, who's a former Rosenborg player and our pundit for today's game. Harald! Welcome." x

"Thank you, Kjell, and good evening everyone," the voice of Harald Bratbakk sounded, causing the cheers that had just died down to reverberate once again across the stadium.

"Well, Harald," Kjell Roar, the commentator, said. "What's your take on this stage of the Europa League? Do you see a possibility of our home team, Rosenborg, emerging as the victor after the two legs? Can we qualify for the round of sixteen for the first time in years?"

Harald Bratbakk chuckled. "If it's the same Rosenborg from last season, then we really do have a chance to qualify. As long as the Rosenborg players can immediately emulate their form from last season, then qualifying will no longer be a dream."

"Can you elaborate?"

"First," the pundit said, "There's Zachary, who was really quite impressive against Red Bull Salzburg, Standard Liège, and IF Elfsborg. He can easily break through opponents. He can provide incredible assists to his teammates. And as a plus, he's an incredible goal scorer who can hit the mark even when facing strong opponents. He's clearly the man to watch out for during this game. As long as he can play as usual and help his team score, then beating the Italian side is possible."

"Secondly, there's Rosenborg's new defense, which includes Mikael Dorsin, Yerry Mina, Eric Bailly, and Tore Reginiussen, who are all incredible players. Factor in Thomas Partey, the equally strong defensive-midfielder, then you have yourself quite a solid Rosenborg at the back. So, why can't Rosenborg emerge victorious after the two legs with such a defensive line-up?"

"That's a good analysis, Harald," Kjell Roar, the commentator, chipped in. "What about Fiorentina? How do you see them fairing against Rosenborg?"

"Of course, Fiorentina is the better side on paper and the favorite to win today's game," the pundit was quick to reply. "In their squad, they have impressive players like Stefan Savic, Marvin Compper, Juan Cuadrado, Anderson Oliveira, Ante Rebić, Federico Bernardeschi, Giuseppe Rossi, Mario Gómez, and Alessandro Matri. These are all incredible players who can do wonders with the ball, and in theory, they should be able to beat Rosenborg. However, that's just in theory. Football is a game of surprises. You can never be sure what will happen until the players are on the pitch."

"Thank you, Harald, for the analysis," Kjell Roar said. "The players of both teams have just started warming up on the pitch. But why is it that I can't seem to see Mike Jensen, Tobias Mikkelsen, and John Chibuike among the Rosenborg players warming up?"

"Maybe, they are injured," Harald said a bit hesitantly.

"That would be a blow for Rosenborg as the three of them were quite phenomenal players last season," Kjell said with an audible sigh. "Can a Rosenborg without those three players really win?"

"The good news is Zachary being among the players warming up," Harald said. "As long as he's in the squad, then even miracles are possible for Rosenborg."

"Let's hope so."

FWEEEEEEE

At exactly 7:00 PM, the referee blew the whistle with zest, sending the stadium into an explosion of excited frenzy. Nicki Nielsen, Rosenborg's center forward, didn't dilly-dally in the slightest. He kicked off the game by passing the ball back into his midfield before running towards the other side of the pitch.

The highly-anticipated Europa League game between Rosenborg and Fiorentina had finally begun. The Rosenborg players immediately arrayed themselves into a more defensive type of a 4-3-3 formation while passing the ball around. On the other hand, the Fiorentina players shaped up into a 3-5-2 flat formation before pressing forward to close down Rosenborg's passing spaces. With both teams showing a high level of discipline during the first few minutes, the game soon evolved into a battle of wits in the middle of the field.

Whenever the three Rosenborg midfielders would receive the ball, the five Fiorentina midfielders would be upon them in a flash like a pack of wolves. With their tenacity, they would force the Rosenborg players to play quick passes forward, which, in most cases, wouldn't amount to anything.

On the other hand, when the Fiorentina midfielders were on the ball, they would pass it around slowly and steadily, making sure to stretch the entire Rosenborg squad before passing forward. On the whole, they were clearly a much better-organized midfield, which was already causing Rosenborg plenty of problems within the first fifteen minutes.

In particular, the three midfielders - Juan Cuadrado, Anderson Oliveira, and Borja Valero were really impressive whenever they were on the ball. Even Zachary, Rosenborg's star midfielder, could do nothing about their fluid passing football. That was because they would not panic even when closed down and would always release the ball quickly to their teammates to keep Fiorentina's game flowing.

In that way, the game gradually tilted towards Fiorentina's favor as the minutes flashed by. Slowly, the guys from Italy built up their momentum with a steadfastness typical of the players of an experienced European side.

"Tiki, taka, Tiki, taka..."

Passes were flowing like water as the Fiorentina players chipped away at Rosenborg's defense. They were like a well-oiled machine as they dictated the game's tempo while occasionally unleashing lethal passes into the box with an unhurried consistency.

With the momentum obviously on their side, they soon got their first clear chance on goal in the 21st minute. After receiving a well-timed through pass, Juan Cuadrado, Fiorentina's right-winger, made an excellent run on the right flank. He raced across the touchline like a bullet train on the rails before sending a teasing cross towards Rosenborg's box.

The cross was on point and managed to draw a clear parabola over the heads of several Rosenborg defenders before descending into the box. What followed was a tense moment for Rosenborg's defense as Alessandro Matri, one of Fiorentina's forwards, outjumped the center-backs to meet the incoming cross.

Alessandro Matri was a sharp striker, especially when finishing with headers. He could hardly miss in the air, and that time was no different. With natural movements akin to those of a ballet dancer, he angled his entire body slightly before planting a bullet of a header towards the goal from around the penalty spot.

SILENCE!!

The cheers died down as the ball zoomed towards the inside of the right post. And soon, it flashed past the outstretched hands of the keeper before homing into the back of the net.

GOAL!!

Fiorentina had managed to draw first blood in the 22nd minute. The Italian side had managed to score first and at the same time obtain a crucial away goal in the Europa League's round of thirty-two fixture. They'd obviously taken their first firm steps towards qualifying for the next round of the tournament.

"Damn!"

Coach Johansen could only place his hands at the back of his head as he watched the Fiorentina players celebrating the goal within their technical area. He was at his wit's end as the Italian team had clearly

outsmarted him in all areas of the field. They'd even isolated Zachary, his star player, through double-teaming tactics and prevented him from receiving the ball from his teammates. With such a pivotal player contained, Rosenborg's whole offense had crumbled and failed to sustain any pressure on the Italian side.. The final result was Fiorentina settling into their game and then scoring the opening goal.

Chapter 316 - Slight Change In Tactics

Coach Johansen was a nervous wreck as he continued following the game after the goal celebrations. That was because he couldn't make any extensive adjustments to the squad before half-time, even though Fiorentina was once again already dictating the game's tempo. The Italian side hadn't let up on the pressure even though they were already one goal ahead of Rosenborg at an away ground.

"What to do?"

Coach Johansen started stroking his beard as he studied Fiorentina's playing style. The Italian team's five midfielders were still outclassing his players in the midfield as they played very flamboyant one-touch or two-touch football. Their individual off-the-ball movements were just exquisite, making it easy for their teammates to spot them and pass the ball to them. For sure, they were the most crucial factor that coach Johansen had to deal with if he wished to best Fiorentina. As long as he couldn't find a solution to contain them, he would, without a doubt, lose the game.

"Why can't we tell our two forwards on the flanks to fall back into midfield?" Trond Henriksen, his assistant, supplied from beside him. "With the two of them back in midfield, we'll be able to switch from our current 4-3-3 formation to the more solid 4-5-1 formation. That way, we'll balance out the numbers in the middle of the field and ensure that the opponents don't outplay us in midfield. What do you think?"

"It's a good idea," Coach Johansen concurred, his eyes never leaving the field of play. "You can go ahead and inform both Borek and Alexander to fall back into midfield so as to help contain that Juan Cuadrado and Manuel Vargas on the flanks. Additionally, tell Zachary to start playing a free role on the field. Let him move around freely so that he can cause some chaos within Fiorentina's formation. If it so happens that he gets a chance, let him shoot and try out on goal. We shall make additional changes during half-time."

"Okay," Trond Henriksen replied, nodding. "I will go ahead and talk to both our flank players and Zachary when the game goes on a break. The three of them should be able to adjust accordingly in less than five minutes."

"Good," Coach Johansen said. "Go ahead, and do what you have to do. Let's hope the boys can hold off Fiorentina until half-time."

"The coach wants me to play a free role position on the field!"

Zachary's eyes widened after receiving the instructions from the assistant coach on the sidelines. He was a bit startled since a free-role position meant that the coach had given him free rein on the pitch. As a result, he had the creative license to decide where and how he played on the field — as opposed to a set position that he would have had to fulfill under normal circumstances. For instance, he could move away from the central midfield position and drop wide into the wings as long as he saw an opportunity to break through the opponent's defense.

"What about the midfield," Zachary hurriedly asked while glancing around. The game was on a temporary break since Daniel Þorlund, Rosenborg's keeper, was still on the ground, receiving attention from the medics. So, he reckoned that he still had some time to ask a few more questions before the game restarted.

"The flank players will drop back to populate the midfield," Trond Henriksen, the assistant coach, replied. "The two of them should be able to work together with Takumi Minamino and Thomas Partey to put up a fair fight against Fiorentina's 'five-man' midfield. So, don't worry about the midfield, and move freely by following your instinct. And, please don't forget to try out the keeper if you get an opportunity."

"Okay, understood," Zachary replied before running back to the center of the field. Daniel Þorlund, Rosenborg's keeper, had just gotten up from the ground after receiving attention from the medics. As a result, the game was about to restart once again.

FWEEEEEEE

After a few more seconds of waiting, the referee blew the whistle and motioned for the game to restart. Daniel Þorlund, Rosenborg's keeper who was with the ball at that moment, didn't choose to take the goal kick high and long that time around. He instead played a short diagonal pass to Mikael Dorsin, Rosenborg's left-back.

Mikael received the ball with a deft touch, just at the edge of the 18-yard box. He then passed it forward to Thomas Partey, Rosenborg's defensive midfielder, before any opponent could close him down.

Thomas also acted just as Mikael had done. He stepped forward to control the ball before spinning around and passing it towards the right flank where Alexander S?derlund, Rosenborg right-winger, was lurking.

Zachary immediately took off towards the right flank after Alexander controlled the ball. He was so fast as he cut through the ranks of the players, heading towards the ball's position. By relying on his S-graded agility, he was soon only a few yards from Alexander.

"Pass!" He yelled.

Alexander S?derlund, Rosenborg's right-winger, reacted immediately after hearing his shout. With a well-timed deft touch, he escaped the tight marking of the defender before flicking the ball to Zachary.

Zachary immediately passed it to Takumi Minamino, his original counterpart in attacking midfield. The two of them soon started playing a series of one-twos as they bore down on Fiorentina's box like a raging Tsunami.

It was then that Borja Valero, Fiorentina's defensive midfielder, paced forward to close down their partnership. However, Zachary stepped around him with a simple weave-and-turn before continuing towards the box. His movements were natural, just like moving clouds and flowing water, as he dribbled the ball forward while occasionally exchanging one-twos with his teammates.

"Shoot, Zachary! Shoot..."

Suddenly, a loud yell from the sidelines cut across the pitch and made it to his ears after he'd just stepped into the final third. Since he could tell that it was the commanding voice of Coach Johansen, he reacted almost by instinct.

He pulled his right foot all the way back, exerted some force, and delivered a violent kick right in the middle of the ball.

Whoosh!

The ball instantly roared forward like a bullet right out of a sniper muzzle. It drew a fierce arc through the air as it whizzed towards the top right corner like a raging tiger.. For sure, the force carried by the ball at that moment was immense.

Chapter 317 The Unlucky Rosenborg

"BANG!"

The sound of the ball smashing against the crossbar sounded next, causing most of the Rosenborg fans to sigh with regret. Just one more inch below, and the ball would have, without a doubt, found its way into the back of the net since the tremendous force behind the shot had already rendered the keeper helpless. Even coach Johansen had already raised his arms up in the air to celebrate due to the surety of the moment.

However, it seemed like the goddess of luck wasn't on Rosenborg's side that evening. With a slight swerve at the final moment, the ball had deviated slightly from its intended course before smashing off the crossbar and bouncing back towards the box.

"Hurry up and clear the ball!"

Suddenly, the voice of Vincenzo Montella, Fiorentina's head coach, reverberated across the pitch like thunder just as the ball was about to land in the box.

The Fiorentina defenders didn't need their coach's reminder since they were already pouncing towards the bouncing ball as if their lives were at stake.

In particular, Stefan Savic, one of Fiorentina's three defenders, was a notch faster than his counterparts. He arrived in the box like a whirlwind before kicking the ball hard without regard for anything. He hadn't even dared to take a single touch on the ball since Nicki Nielsen was right on his heels.

"Damn!"

Zachary could only sigh as he watched the ball flying out of the field for a corner kick. His mood was slightly down since he'd missed out on an opportunity to score and bring the proceedings on the pitch back to level ground.

But more than disappointed, he was also slightly startled. That was because he'd just noticed that both his technique and power while shooting had improved tremendously over the past few months. It seemed like the breakthrough of his agility, body control, and strength attributes to the S- grading had also pushed the power and lethality of his shots to another level. As a result, he could already release missiles of balls from outside of the eighteen-yard box without expending much effort.

What a pleasant surprise!

Within an instant, various thoughts flashed through Zachary's mind as his heartbeat accelerated. He was no longer feeling depressed over the missed opportunity after realizing that he'd unknowingly made another significant breakthrough on his path to become a football great.

As long as he could effectively utilize his recently-improved power and lethality of his shots, then he would have a lot more options while on the attack. Whenever an opportunity presented itself, he could choose to either unleash missiles at goal from outside the eighteen or break through the defense and step into the box with skills. As a result, his playing style would evolve and become more lethal.

"Zachary! Don't mind, don't mind..." the voice of Mikael Dorsin, the assistant captain, suddenly made it to his ears as he was considering how he could utilize his new weapon to evolve his own playing style. "It's only the first half. You'll get another chance to score sooner or later. So, don't worry, and let's prepare for the corner kick."

"I understand," Zachary said while nodding at the left-back. "Thanks. Let's prepare for the corner."

"Good." Mikael flashed him an encouraging smile before heading towards Fiorentina's box.

Zachary also didn't dare to dilly-dally any longer. He followed after the left-back since he was also looking forward to attacking the corner ball. He wanted to utilize every opportunity to score since his team was facing off against a powerful opponent. So, taking part in the corner kick was a must for him.

However, no sooner had he stepped into Fiorentina's box than a silhouette dressed in a blue jersey was upon him. It was Stefan Savic, one of Fiorentina's three defenders. Without regard for anything, the defender stuck to him like superglue, not allowing him even an inch of space within the box.

Nonetheless, Zachary wasn't the least bit daunted by the defender's aggressiveness. He just ignored the defender and kept his eyes pivoted towards the corner flag where Borek Dockal was getting ready to take the corner kick.

Why fight off an opponent even before the ball could arrive? Zachary saw no point in that as it was simply a waste of energy. Moreover, it was the sort of behavior that could easily earn you a yellow card from the referee. So why hustle? He would wait for the corner ball before trying to outmaneuver his opponent.

FWEEEEEEE

The referee finally blew the whistle after a few more seconds. Borek Dockal, Rosenborg's left-winger, immediately floated a teasing cross towards the box from the corner flag.

It was finally the moment. So, Zachary started moving right away. He shifted his center of gravity from left to right before spinning around and heading to the other side of the box.

With that well-timed almost-instantaneous movement, he'd managed to throw off Stefan Savic, his marker. As a result, he was unmarked as he rushed towards the direction of the descending ball.

At that moment, he felt as if the time had come to a standstill as he pushed off the ground to meet the corner ball. Then, before the opponents could react, he angled his body slightly before planting a header towards the goal.

"Please go in... go in..."

He willed the ball to find its way into the back of the net as he started descending back towards the ground. He so much wished to score so as to help his team bring proceedings back to leveled ground. But the next moment, his heart sunk to the abyss of desperation once again. It seems like luck wasn't really on his side that evening.

That was because Neto, Fiorentina's goalkeeper, had stretched himself and snatched the ball out of mid-air with a diving save to deny Rosenborg a chance to score. As a result, the score was still one goal to nil in favor of Fiorentina during the 40th minute.

"Don't let him start the ball before we fall back into defense!"

Suddenly, someone shouted and broke Zachary out of his moment of desperation. But the shout had come a little too late. That was because Neto was already rushing towards the edge of the area with the ball in hand. Before any of the Rosenborg players could close him down, the goalkeeper made a one-armed throw towards the right flank where Alessandro Matri, Fiorentina's striker, was lurking.

"It's a counterattack! Hurry up and rush back to defend..." The voice of Coach Johansen reverberated from the sidelines. He was like a madman as he waved for his players to run back at full speed to prevent Fiorentina from scoring another goal.

However, the switch from defense to attack by Fiorentina was so swift that almost no Rosenborg player had managed to react in time. As a result, not even the quick-footed Zachary could catch up to the fast-flying Fiorentina forwards when they were already more than thirty yards away. So, it was only up to the two Rosenborg players who hadn't partaken in the corner kick to stop the counterattack. Otherwise, Rosenborg would concede the second goal on the night, for sure.

Chapter 318 A Missile to Reignite the Spirit of the Team

Alessandro Matri had not had many opportunities to showcase his talent as a striker while playing for AC Milan over the past year. He'd even become a target of abuse from fans after only playing six times for the Rossoneri and only managing to score once during the entire year. He'd been the true definition of a signing-gone-wrong for the case of the Italian giants.

But since he'd joined a new team - Fiorentina on loan, he was determined to turn over a new leaf. He was hungry to play and to score a lot of goals. He yearned to prove himself as an incredible striker so as to shut the blubber mouths of his critics and, of course, get another call up to the Italian squad.

Thus, he couldn't afford to waste any chance while on the pitch.

So, after receiving the ball from Neto, Fiorentina's keeper, the first thought in his mind was on how to advance the counterattack as quickly and as efficiently as possible.

Before any Rosenborg player could close him down, he turned around with the ball hooked to his foot before taking off towards the other side of the field. His speed was truly incredible as he raced along the touchline on the right flank, leaving almost every player on the field in the dust.

Only Thomas Partey, the Rosenborg defensive midfielder who hadn't partaken in the corner kick, managed to catch up to the Italian. However, Alessandro didn't lose his composure in the slightest.

He merely flicked the ball to Josip Illicic, the other Fiorentina forward, before running around the blockade imposed by Thomas Partey. And soon, he was once again racing towards the goal after receiving a return pass from his counterpart.

It was another dangerous moment for Rosenborg as Alessandro was one-on-one with the keeper. Most Rosenborg fans prayed for a higher power to intervene and stop the opponent from scoring. However, all was in vain.

With a well-timed flick, Alessandro Matri executed his magic. He stepped around Daniel Rønlund, Rosenborg's keeper, with confidence before burying the ball into the back of the net to complete the counterattack.

ROSENBORG BK 0: ACF Fiorentina 2

Most Rosenborg fans had gone silent after their team conceded the second goal close to the end of the first half. They lacked energy and were merely following the game with listless eyes as if they had just lost their close relatives. Only a few hardcore supporters were still discussing the proceedings on the pitch with bloodshot eyes.

"F*ck!" A fan cursed out loud after Rosenborg had missed yet another chance on goal. "Why did Coach Johansen leave Mike, Tobias, and John Chibuike out of the squad?"

"Who knows?" Another fan said with a sigh. "What worries me is that it's already the 70th minute. However, Coach Johansen hasn't made any substitutions. Has he already decided to give up on the Europa League?"

"There is still over a month to the commencement of the Norwegian football season. Why would the coach give up on the Europa League? It doesn't make sense!"

"Let's stop making excuses for the coach," another fan chipped in. "He really miscalculated for this game. Firstly, he added two inexperienced players to the squad. They can't defend, and they can't link up well with Zachary upfront. As a result, they've allowed Fiorentina's five-man-midfield to dominate us."

"Secondly," the same fan continued. "All the players are performing below par. Their positioning, passing, and even marking abilities haven't been up to standard throughout the entire duration of the game. So, how can we expect to win against Fiorentina — a team that has always put up incredible performances even in Europe?"

"True," another fan concurred while nodding. "Our organization during this game had been terrible. Even though Zachary has tried to go at it alone by taking many shots at goal, he hasn't managed to change much as football is a game of eleven. We might really be dropping out of the Europa League."

"Might!?" A fan questioned with a sigh. "You still think that we have a chance to qualify when Fiorentina is already two goals ahead? Moreover, since those two goals are away goals, we'll need to score three at Fiorentina's home ground to qualify. And if the opponents manage to net even a single goal while in Italy, the situation will worsen. We'll then have to score four. Do you still think that we can qualify? Don't be funny."

"This game has yet to end," another fan remarked. "We still have more than 15 minutes to play. There's still hope to score and bring the proceedings back to level. So, let's not lose hope and continue supporting our team."

On the pitch, Zachary could no longer contain his frustration. He'd come into the game with confidence, especially after pushing several of his attributes to the S- grade. As a result, he'd really hoped to impress by putting up the most incredible performance of his career. However, it was already the 75th minute, yet his team, Rosenborg, was still trailing Fiorentina by two goals. Even after trying his utmost to breakdown the Italian team on several occasions, he'd still not succeeded. It was as if luck wasn't on his side that day.

"Guys! Don't give up!" A shout from the sidelines broke him out of his moment of reverie. "We still have fifteen minutes to the end of the game. Continue trying, and we'll surely score."

Zachary turned to the sidelines and noticed that it was Coach Johansen yelling. The coach seemed to have never given birth to the thought of giving up, even when his team was two goals down. He was as spirited as ever while roaring out instructions for his players.

"Zachary!" Coach Johansen continued. "Continue trying out their keeper. If you get an opportunity, don't think about many things. Just shoot and you might score."

Zachary nodded while giving the coach a thumbs-up to indicate that he'd gotten the message. Without losing a second, he ran towards the right flank to defend against another one of Fiorentina's throw-ins.

FWEEEEEEE

The referee blew the whistle soon after. Juan Cuadrado, Fiorentina's right-winger, immediately stepped forward and threw the ball towards Anderson Oliveira, his counterpart in midfield.

Zachary reacted immediately on seeing the ball making a parabola from the touchline into the pitch. He was upon Anderson Oliveira in a flash with his incredible pace. Before the midfielder could even control the ball, Zachary was already jumping in to duel for the ball midair.

In an aerial duel, height mattered a lot. So, it was Zachary, with his 6'4 physique, who came out on top and headed the ball towards Thomas Partey, his teammate in midfield.

Thomas Partey was as efficient as usual. He didn't hold the ball for long but flicked it towards Takumi Minamino in midfield. Takumi also handled it with a sense of urgency and quickly floated it towards Nicki, who'd just switched to the right-wing.

Another Rosenborg attack was on. As a result, the home fans were again on their feet, singing the popular Rosenborg chants to encourage their team. Their voices continued resounding for the next few seconds until they hit a thunderous crescendo when the ball once again came to Zachary.

Zachary, of course, didn't disappoint the fans' expectations. With a simple shift of his center of gravity, followed by an elastico dribble, he changed directions instantaneously before breaking into the box. His movements were quick since he'd already pushed his agility and body control to the S- grading.

However, the Fiorentina defenders didn't allow him to do as he pleased and were upon him in just a second. They surrounded him immediately and closed off all his shooting angles. As a result, he could only step back and pass the ball to Borek Dockal, who'd just arrived at the edge of the box from an acute angle.

"Just shoot before the defenders close you down!" Zachary yelled as he expertly flicked the ball towards the right-winger after drawing the defenders out of the box.

"BAM!"

The next moment, the sound of Borek's boot smashing against the ball reverberated across the area, causing Zachary's heart to race with anticipation. The right-winger had done as requested and sent a powerful shot towards the inside of the right post.

However, Neto, Fiorentina's keeper, once again reacted immediately to save the situation. With a well-timed dive, he sent the ball away from his goal to deny Rosenborg a chance to score for the umpteenth time that evening. Anyone could tell that he was an incredible goalkeeper.

Nevertheless, the danger was still at large for Fiorentina. Since the shot had been a powerful one, the keeper had only pushed the ball towards the edge of the box — and into Zachary's path.

"Don't allow him to shoot! Block him!" A yell could be heard from the sidelines as Zachary controlled the ball while spinning around to face Fiorentina's goal.

At that moment, there was nothing else on Zachary's mind except the ball. He didn't even try to find out if there were opponents blocking his shooting angle since there was no time. What mattered was simply shooting, and the rest would have to depend on luck.

"Here goes nothing!"

Zachary acted immediately before the opponents could close him down. He drew his foot all the way back and struck the ball ferociously, completing the action in one go. It was as if he'd imbued all his frustration into the shot.

He would either kill the keeper or score. That was his strategy.

"BAM!"

The sweet sound of a boot connecting with the ball echoed in his ears the next moment as the ball whistled and howled towards the goal. It spun at high speed while tearing through the air as it quickly raged forward with unprecedented force and speed. Before the keeper could even react, it smashed the crossbar before bouncing into the back of the net.

SILENCE!

The whole 18-yard box turned silent as all the players stole fearful glances at Zachary. They were obviously shocked by the power of his shot. Was he trying to kill someone? Or was he trying to put a hole into the net? Their expressions could clearly express what they were thinking at that moment.

However, Zachary just disregarded them. He quickly picked the ball from the back of the net while shouting to his teammates to hurry back. He then raced all the way to the center spot before placing it there.

Since his team was still trailing by a goal, he had no time to waste and didn't celebrate the goal. At that moment, the only issue on his mind was on how to score Rosenborg's next goal before the end of the 90 minutes.

Chapter 319 Unstoppable Momentum

The game continued after a short while. After scoring one goal, Rosenberg had all the momentum. Zachary, Takumi Minamino, Nicki Nielsen, Borek Dockal, and Alexander S?derlund were like predators on the attacking line, launching wave after wave of assaults on Fiorentina's goal. Their attacking football was incredible for the next few minutes.

However, in some magical way, Fiorentina managed to hold on and stopped Rosenberg from gaining anything from their relentless attacking. Balls repeatedly smashed against goal posts while Neto, Fiorentina's keeper, occasionally made incredible saves. Nonetheless, Zachary and co couldn't bag the equalizer no matter how hard they bombarded Fiorentina's goal. It was as if some higher force was working against them.

"Let's introduce three substitutes at once," Coach Johansen said to his assistant after watching for another minute.

"That's a good idea," Trond Henriksen, his assistant, replied. "They are likely to add five minutes of injury time after the ninety. So, the substitutes might really make an impact in those few minutes. But, who are we introducing?"

"Jonas Svensson, Karl Toko Ekambi, and Paul Kasongo," the coach said, his eyes never leaving the field of play.

"Eh!" Trond Henriksen's eyes widened with surprise.

"Do you find my choice of substitutions wrong?" Coach Johansen queried after a moment.

"No, not at all," the assistant replied hastily. "I was just surprised that you would allow Karl Toko Ekambi and Paul Kasongo to make their debuts in such an important match."

"Even though young, they are good players," Coach Johansen remarked. "They've also been doing incredibly well during training. So, there's no reason why I shouldn't allow them to participate in today's match. They might even be the solution to our problems on the pitch."

"Oh, okay, I understand," Trond replied with a sigh. "I'll go ahead and prep the subs. Who are we substituting out?"

"Takumi Minamino, Borek Dockal, and Alexander S?derlund."

"Eh!" Trond was once again surprised. "But those three players have played great football over the last four minutes. Should we really be taking them out?"

"No matter how well they played, they still failed to score," Coach Johansen stated. "As attackers, they have failed to fulfill their core roles. So, we should have even substituted them out of the game a few minutes back."

"Oh, okay." Trond nodded. "I'll prep the subs right away."

In the stands, the fans were surprised after noticing the three substitutes on the touchline. Of course, most of them were familiar with Jonas Svensson, the midfielder who occasionally played as a winger for Rosenborg. But what perplexed them was the presence of two new faces among the substitutes.

"What the hell is Coach Johansen trying to do?" One of the fans couldn't take it anymore and let loose a helpless yell. "It's already coming to the 90th minute, but why is the coach introducing two unknown players? Has he really given up on the Europa League?"

"Who knows?" Another fan replied. "The coach might have lost his touch during the Christmas holidays. I also don't understand how he can introduce two inexperienced players at this stage in the game. Moreover, all the attackers have played incredibly well over the last few minutes. So, who is he going to take out?"

"Let's hope that it isn't Zachary," another fan teased.

"Man, don't jinx our game. Taking out Zachary at this moment is like giving up the game. So, unless the coach is totally out of his mind, there's no chance of that happening..."

The supporters continued discussing while following the game until the fourth official put up the board to signal the substitutions. It was then that the voice of Kjell Roar, the commentator, cut across the din in the stadium to introduce the three substitutes.

"The Rosenborg coach has decided to introduce three substitutes during the 90th minute of the game," the commentator announced. "Coming on for Rosenborg's new midfielder - Takumi Minamino is Jonas Svensson, one of the most promising players on the Rosenborg squad. He'll most likely be taking on the role of an attacking midfielder for the remaining five minutes of injury time."

"On the other hand," the commentator continued, "Karl Toko Ekambi and Paul Kasongo will be coming on for Borek Dockal and Alexander S?derlund, respectively. They're both new players making their official debuts for Rosenborg in today's game. Can they make a difference in the added five minutes? Let's wait and see."

A moment of silence descended upon the stadium right after the commentator had introduced the substitutes. Most Rosenborg fans couldn't make heads or tails of the coach's decision since they'd never heard the names - Karl Toko Ekambi and Paul Kasongo. The abilities of the two players were simply an enigma to them. So, they just sat there in the stands without any reaction while inwardly praying for a miracle to happen in the last few minutes of game play.

FWEEEEEEEE

Immediately after all the substitutes had stepped onto the pitch, the referee blew the whistle and the game restarted. For the next minute, Rosenborg's momentum slowed down a little due to the new changes in the squad. As a result, the Fiorentina players showed signs of recovery. The men in blue soon started playing their one-touch or two-touch football as they tried their best to hold on to possession.

However, how could Zachary allow them to do as they pleased? He couldn't afford to waste time since only about four minutes were remaining to the end of the game. So, he worked harder than ever while yelling at his teammates to close down the opponents as quickly as possible. And soon, the team's efforts paid off and quickly turned the game's tempo.

The relentless high-pressing by the Rosenberg players had forced the Fiorentina players to play a long ball forward, which was immediately picked up by Yerry Mina, the center-back.

Yerry Mina handled the ball with a sense of urgency and quickly kicked it to Mikael Dorsin on the left flank. Mikael did the same and flicked it to Thomas Partey, Rosenberg's holding midfielder, who also immediately passed it to Paul Kasongo on the right-wing. The right-winger also didn't dilly-dally and threaded a pass towards Zachary in the middle.

"Tiki, taka, Tiki, taka..."

The passes flowed like spring water as the Rosenberg players pressed forward like patient hunters eyeing their game. With Zachary's organization, they didn't panic while attacking even when they were well aware that only a couple of minutes were remaining to the end of the game. Instead, they moved forward slowly but surely, stretching the entire Fiorentina line-up with their fluid passing. In that way, they soon managed to create a gap in Fiorentina's defensive shape not long after.

Modibo Diakité was the Fiorentina center-back who stepped out of position to take on Paul Kasongo on the right flank. As a result, he'd left a gap behind him in Fiorentina's defense.

Of course, Zachary, who was nearby, wouldn't miss the opportunity of taking advantage of such a defensive mistake. His incredible spatial awareness made him aware of the blunder immediately. And within a flash, he ran into the space left by the defender while signaling Kasongo to pass the ball to him.

Kasongo had spent plenty of time playing with Zachary in the academy and on Rosenberg's training grounds. So, the winger knew his habits. He noticed his run immediately and threaded the ball to him without losing even a second.

The pass was on point and exactly where Zachary wanted it. With a single deft touch, he received the ball before taking off towards Fiorentina's box like a raging tiger in the wild.

It was a chance for Rosenberg to score. And, of course, Zachary's speed, rated at the S- rank by the system, exploded forth, sending the Rosenberg fans into a wave of frenzy. They sang his name at the top of their lungs, boosting his morale as he rushed forward with the ball like there was no tomorrow. Before long, he was steeping into the 18-yard box where he met an obstacle.

It was Stefan Savic, another Fiorentina center-back, who'd come forward to close him down at the edge of the box. However, with a simple change of pace, followed by an improvised version of the Marseille turn, he left the defender butt-down on the ground, eating the dust. And as soon as he'd completed his 360-degree-turn, he was one-on-one with Neto, Fiorentina's keeper.

Lightning-fast thoughts flashed through Zachary's mind as he drew his leg back while observing the position of the keeper. Neto had made many incredible saves that night. It was as if the keeper had been on drugs. So, Zachary was ruthless while deciding on how to place the shot. He'd to ensure that he would score even if he'd to blast the keeper into the back of the net.

"Catch this if you can!"

Zachary muttered under his breath as he swung down his leg like a whip. With the sort of proficiency practiced thousands of times on the training ground, he unleashed a powerful kick with the top of his boot onto the ball. He'd again imbued all his frustrations and hopes for his team into that one shot.

"BAM!"

The ball was like lightning tearing through the void. While carrying a strong wind, it cut a vicious trajectory through the air as it raged towards Neto's head like a ballistic missile.

"Damn!"

Neto, Fiorentina's goalkeeper, couldn't help but curse out loud. He instinctively brought his hands before his face, maybe to protect himself and stop the ball from making its way into the back of the net.

But all his efforts were fruitless as the force carried by Zachary's shot was beyond what words could describe. The ball blasted at his arms like a hammer smashing against an anvil, jolting him a step back before making its way into the back of the net. He could do nothing to stop Zachary from scoring since he'd unleashed the powerful shot from only a few yards away.

GOAAAL!

ROSENBORG BK 2: AFC FIORENTINA 2.

The stadium exploded into another wave of cheers. In the 94th minute, with only one minute of injury time remaining to the end of the game, Rosenborg had scored the equalizer.

That time around, Zachary chose to run to the corner flag to celebrate with the rest of his teammates since he'd already managed to tie the score. There was no longer any need to panic since only a minute of gameplay remained to the conclusion of the proceedings that night. He was well aware that the winner between the two teams could only be determined after the second leg scheduled for the following week at Fiorentina's home ground.

Chapter 320 Post-Match Routines

Zachary woke up later than usual the following day. He was suffering from post-match fatigued since he'd played all the ninety minutes against Fiorentina the previous evening. He couldn't even walk with a steady gait since all his joints were aching as if they were full of lead.

Be that as it may, he didn't dare miss exercising that morning as he was a man still on a mission to improve himself. He worked with weights for twenty minutes and then jumped on the treadmill for a 15-minute conditioning session. After that, he performed some static stretches for five minutes before switching to a yoga routine to boost his recovery from post-match fatigue.

Zachary was well aware that he couldn't afford to waste time resting on his laurels since he hadn't yet mastered the Robinho-step-over juju. So, he was very meticulous while going through each of the routines and performed them with a hundred percent focus until he was sweating and out of breath.

By the end of the session, he could feel that his muscles had relaxed to a great extent and were no longer aching like when he'd just got up from bed. For sure, the drills were already boosting his recovery.

After completing the exercises, he took a cold shower before heading to the kitchen to prepare himself something to eat. He was very thorough while arranging his meal since he was well aware of the importance of breakfast for a professional athlete.

Within one hour of waking up, the body would always be like a sponge ready to absorb energy from food. Thus, if an athlete missed eating breakfast in that small window in the morning, the metabolism would slow down. The body would then be forced to look for alternative fuel sources by breaking down the body's stores. What would follow would be the decline in the athlete's performance during the rest of the day.

Over the past four months, Zachary had been regularly consulting a sports nutritionist on how to handle his meals. He'd even developed a specialized diet for each meal for every single day of the week to meet his training needs. So, he didn't waste any time deliberating on what to cook for breakfast that morning.

He prepared some milk, eggs, bacon, toasted bread, and plenty of mixed-fruit juice with a practiced hand before settling on his dining table to feast on his breakfast. In order to pass the time more effectively, he even started browsing the sports news on his phone.

Most of the articles in the news were about the recently-played UEFA Champions League and Europa League matches. However, the ones that attracted Zachary's attention were those reporting the results and match summaries from the previous day's Europa League round of thirty-two stage.

Juventus had won its Europa League home game against Trabzonspor, the Turkish football club, by a score of 2:0. Daniel Osvaldo and Paul Pogba each scored in the 16th and 90th minute, respectively, to ensure that the Italian giants came out on top at the end of the night. Moreover, considering their commanding performance, they were also the favorites to win the second leg that was to be held in Turkey the following week. If nothing unexpected transpired, they would surely qualify for the round of sixteen.

Thence, should Rosenborg overcome Fiorentina in Florence the following week, they would have a high probability of facing off against Juventus, the leviathan of Italian football, in the round of sixteen.

"What kind of luck is this?"

Zachary couldn't help but let out a sigh as he considered the chances of Rosenborg against the Italian giants. A much-weaker Fiorentina had given them a hard time the previous night. So, on paper, the odds would evidently be against them if they played Juventus — a team brimming with incredible players like Carlos Tévez, Paul Pogba, Arturo Vidal, and Andrea Pirlo, among others. Considering those fixtures ahead, the luck of the Troll Kids in the Europa League draw was really terrible.

"The road ahead is sure filled with hardships."

Zachary shook his head in resignation before continuing to savor his breakfast. He'd resolved to take one match at a time and leave everything else to luck. Nothing else mattered to him aside from Rosenberg's Europa League match scheduled for next week.

As long as Rosenberg could defeat Fiorentina and qualify for the round of sixteen, then he would be satisfied. He would have completed at least one of the system's 2013/14 Europa League serial mission milestones. Thus, he would no longer have to worry about the system penalty of 120,000 Juju points.

"Bzzt Bzzzt! Bzzt Bzzzt!"

The phone in his hands started vibrating while he was still enjoying his breakfast. He immediately noticed that the call was from Kasongo, his long-time friend. So, without losing a moment, he accepted the call before placing the phone against his ear.

"Hello, Kasongo," he said. "How are you doing?"

"I'm okay," Kasongo replied from the other end of the line. "How are you today, Zachary?"

"I'm also fine," Zachary replied. "By the way, before I forget, let me first congratulate you upon making your official debut for Rosenberg yesterday. You played quite well and even provided an assist for the second goal. The coach will surely remember you while making the squad for the next game."

Kasongo chuckled from the other end of the line. "Thanks, Zach. I also hope to get more opportunities to play for Rosenberg from now on."

"You certainly will if you continue working hard."

"Hearing that from you puts my heart at ease. By the way, Zach. I'm here with the Otterson brothers, and we were wondering if you have some time to hang out with us. We wish to consult you about some issues."

"Oh!" Zachary said, glancing at his wall clock. "I have a training session with my fitness trainer at 3:00 PM. But, I'll be free to meet up before then."

"Then, that's great," Kasongo said excitedly. "Can we come over to your place right now?"

"That's also okay."

"Great," Kasongo said. "See you in a bit."

"Okay, see you," Zachary replied before hanging up.
