

Greatest 351

Chapter 351 Rumors

The day after Rosenborg's match against Viking, a very contradictory article started spreading on the web. It claimed that Zachary had fallen out with the Rosenborg executives after they rejected his request to spend more time with his sick grandma, who was in critical condition in a hospital in Zurich.

The article then described the close relationship between Zachary and his grandma, citing how she was his only guardian and the person who'd brought him up. Then, it concluded with a remark on how Zachary was unhappy at Rosenborg and wanted to leave as soon as possible.

The netizens who were Zachary's fans were shocked and incensed after reading the article. They took their anger to the internet and started calling out the Rosenborg officials to explain why they were hindering their star from spending time with his sick grandma. They even bombarded the club's social media accounts with hate comments to ensure that the people responsible would not ignore their case.

Coach Johansen was outraged after the public relations officer marched into his office and showed him the article and the hate comments from the fans. Of course, he didn't believe that the claims had come from Zachary himself. He was already sure that the assertions were simply a load of crap since Zachary would never make them in public. And since the young prodigy's professionalism was unquestionable, it must have been the reporter trying to create some chaos.

"Which idiot wrote this article?" He asked the public relations officer while breathing in deeply to calm himself down. The morning sun rays seeped into his office through the open window to illuminate his face brimming with rage.

"It's a TV2 Sporten reporter called Dag Asbjørn," Sigrid Berg, the PR officer, replied from the other end of the office table. "He published the article on his own personal blog yesterday night."

"Let's sue the idiot," Coach Johansen said with narrowed eyes.

"Easy, easy, there," the public relations officer said. "Let's take it slow and start with the damage control. First, we should contact Zachary and understand his stand on the whole of this farce. If the claims didn't come from him, we ask him to release a strong personal statement to dispute them."

"Of course, the claims didn't come from Zachary," Coach Johansen said with a sigh. "You don't know the boy. He's like a programmed robot who only cares about training and playing football. He wouldn't waste his time giving such nonsensical information to a reporter."

"Then, there might be another possibility," the PR officer said, creasing her brows. "There might be a third party trying to stir up some trouble between Zachary and us. They probably wish to plant a seed of conflict between our two parties so that Zachary can start thinking about leaving."

Coach Johansen raised his brow. "Can such a childish ploy even work? We all know that the information in the article is a load of bullshit. I'm sure that Zachary also doesn't care about the article. So, how can it create a conflict between our two parties?"

"You're looking at the whole issue with a narrow vision," Sigrid said. "Of course, the article itself won't actually spark off the conflict. But it will incite public anger and cause dissatisfaction among the fans. And if Zachary maintains his silence over the whole issue, the fans will slowly start losing trust in him, thinking that he's about to abandon them. They might even boo him and start attacking him through social media, and that will, of course, anger Zachary. That anger and dissatisfaction might be the elements that lead to conflicts with the club."

Coach Johansen narrowed his eyes. He remained silent for a few more seconds before saying, "What do you think we should do? The team doesn't have time for this crap, especially since we're busy preparing for Thursday's game against Lyon."

Sigrid smiled. "As I already said, the first step is to talk to Zachary and ask him to release a strong personal statement to dispute the claims. It doesn't need to be official. It can be a Twitter or even a Facebook post where he clearly states that the information presented in the article is false. Then we shall take up the reins and ensure that the public gets the message."

"Okay," Coach Johansen said, picking up his phone. "I'll call Zachary now and speak to him about the issue."

"Great," the PR officer said, leaning back into her seat. "If he works with us, we should be able to neutralize the whole of this farce by today evening."

Coach Johansen nodded and immediately dialed Zachary's number. "Hello, Zachary," he said when the call connected. "Are you enjoying your day off today?"

"Come on, coach," Zachary answered in a vibrant voice from the other end of the line. "How can I rest when I didn't play even a single minute during yesterday's game? I'm already in the gym, working out with Coach Peters."

"I see," Coach Johansen said, not feeling surprised. The boy was a training maniac. It would be weird if he found him lounging on a beach instead of working out in a gym. "Zachary! Did you read the article about you that has been spreading on the web this morning? It has attracted a lot of attention, especially in Norway."

"Which article?" Zachary seemed confused. Going by his tone, he appeared not to know anything about the article.

Coach Johansen sighed, once again not feeling surprised. He then described the article's content to Zachary in as few words as possible. He ended his narrative by talking about how it was inciting public outrage and causing the fans to attack the Rosenborg management on social media.

"I'm sorry to hear about all that, coach," Zachary replied. "But, I can assure you that the assertions in the article didn't come from my side. Neither myself nor my agent wishes to incite conflict between us and management. You have my word on this."

"I don't doubt you, Zachary," Coach Johansen said. "I only called to propose a way of how we can deal with the article. Otherwise, it will continue causing dissatisfaction among the fans."

"Go ahead," Zachary said. "I'm listening."

Coach Johansen exchanged glances with Sigrid before going ahead and asking Zachary to release a personal statement to dispute the article.

Surprisingly, Zachary was very accommodating towards the whole idea. He even promised to utilize his social media accounts to release the posts before the end of the day.

Coach Johansen thanked him on the club's behalf and ended the call. He then pivoted his attention onto the PR officer again. "It's done," he said with a smile. "He has agreed to release a personal statement disputing the article through his social media accounts."

"That's a great first step to dealing with the issue," Sigrid said as a soft smile outlined her face.

Coach Johansen was startled. "Is there a second step?"

"Of course, there is," Sigrid replied, tone matter-of-factly. "Next, we'll sue the reporter who published the article. We'll attack him on several fronts until he comes out himself to apologize."

"That's a bold move," Coach Johansen said. "You know: When I said that we sue him before, I was only speaking with rage. I didn't expect you, people, to actually launch a lawsuit against him."

"The club chairman is paying close attention to this issue," Sigrid remarked. "He's the one who instructed us to launch the lawsuit. He really doesn't want anyone to mess with his star player's relationship with the club."

"I understand," Coach Johansen said, finally seeing the light. If the club chairman was involved, then the reporter who published the article was in for a tough time over the coming days.

After ending the call with Coach Johansen, Zachary immediately called Emily and told her about the article. He expected her to at least react harshly after hearing about the entire farce. But surprisingly, she took the matter a bit too lightly.

"Why don't you seem surprised?" Zachary asked, settling down on one of the benches in the gym. His t-shirt was drenched in sweat as he'd just ended his workout with Coach Bjørn Peters.

Emily sighed audibly from the other end of the line. "Zachary! It's normal for such articles to keep popping up on the internet as your fame grows."

"Moreover," she continued, "the big teams might even start paying reporters to release such articles so as to sow discord between you and your current club as the transfer window approaches. Their intent is, of course, to encourage you to consider the option of transferring out of Rosenborg by whatever means possible. So, you have to learn to ignore such articles. Otherwise, you'll have to keep running up and down, suing every journalist that reports wrong information about you."

"I get you," Zachary said. "But what about the club's request? They asked me to release a personal statement discrediting the article."

"You shouldn't waste your precious time on such issues, Zachary," Emily advised. "Focus on your training, and let Kristin handle the entire issue. She's your publicity secretary. Her job is to manage your public image."

"She can release a post on your social media accounts disputing the claims in your stead. She can even contact the club's public relations office to arrange how best to handle the matter. So, you, as a player, don't need to waste your brain cells and precious time on such miscellaneous issues. I'm even surprised that the club asked you to do this."

Zachary was startled by Emily's sharp tone. "I understand," he said. "I'll let Kristin handle the issue."

"Great," Emily said from the other end of the line. Her voice had taken on a relaxed tone. "You also have to understand that I have been moving around a lot, making arrangements for the upcoming transfer window. I have even had meetings with several executives from some top European clubs during the previous week. The reporters following your case know that I'm your agent. They can easily deduce that I'm trying to organize a transfer for you, and they will obviously report the info in their articles."

"So, just like you have been doing, continue to ignore the media attention, especially since it's going to increase between now and the upcoming transfer window. If you have some free time, you can even consider taking a vacation to relax instead of caring about what the press is writing about you."

"I understand," Zachary replied. "Thanks for the advice. Is there anything substantial among the arrangements you've been making?"

"Not yet," Emily said. "But when there's a good offer, I'll immediately inform you."

"Okay, Emily," Zachary said. "Thanks for everything. I have to go now as I have to call Kristin immediately. As you advised, I'll let her handle the entire issue."

"That's for the best," Emily said. "Have a good day."

"Have a good day, too," Zachary said before ending the call.

Chapter 352 To Lyon, France

Zachary immediately dialed Kristin's number after ending the call with Emily. She picked up almost instantly, and he quickly told her about the contents of the article and the club's request for him to post a statement discrediting it.

"I had already seen the article," Kristin said with a tinge of resignation in her voice after hearing him out. "I was just about to get in touch with the club's public relations office to organize a way forward to solve the whole issue. But I guess you beat me to the task."

"Then, that makes things easier," Zachary said. "I'll leave everything in your hands since you already know about the article. But first things first, start with making an official post discrediting the content of the article on my behalf. Make it simple, and don't go into details. A brief statement along the lines of I still enjoy a good relationship with the club management might work wonders."

"Don't worry," Kristin replied from the other end of the line. "I know what to do. I'll pen down an appropriate response to the article right away. Then, I'll even contact Emily and have her verify the statement before posting it on your social media accounts."

"Thanks a lot, Kristin," Zachary replied. "I have to return to training now. So, let me say goodbye for now. If you need any info from me, don't hesitate to call my number."

"Okay. But there's one more thing I wish to ask before you hang up, Zachary."

"Go ahead," Zachary said. "I'm all ears."

"Zachary!" Kristin said after a moment. "Could you be thinking about transferring out of Rosenborg soon? As your publicity secretary, I'm just asking to understand your future plans."

Zachary switched the phone to his other ear before saying, "I feel ready to take the next step towards progressing my football career. So, if there's a suitable offer, I'll consider switching to a team in one of the big leagues during the upcoming transfer window."

"I see," Kristin said. "So, there's a high possibility that you'll be moving out of Norway between June 12th and September 1st."

"That's correct," Zachary replied. "If all goes as planned, I will move immediately after the World Cup. But there's no need for the press or the public to know that I'm switching teams. So, you definitely cannot tell another person about this. Otherwise, the whole issue might create a publicity mess that could distract me from football."

"Don't worry," Kristin assured. "I know what's at stake and will definitely not tell any other person about your plans. I was only asking because I also need to start making some preparations if I'm to continue working as your publicity secretary when you move away from Trondheim."

"You wish to continue working as my publicity secretary?"

"Definitely," Kristin was quick to reply.

"Don't you still have to attend university?"

"I'll just transfer to another university," Kristin said. "Zachary! I wish to follow you wherever you go. If you still want me to remain working as your publicity secretary, I won't stay back."

"Of course, you can remain as my publicity secretary," Zachary said. "I was just worried that you might miss out on your university education because of the job. Your grandpa might take my head if he knows that I distracted you from your studies."

Kristin chuckled. "You don't have to worry. I'll transfer to a new university in the new city. Moreover, don't forget that very few people get opportunities to work for highly-skilled athletes who are shooting to fame. So, if I give up such a job, I might as well go and bang my head on the wall."

Zachary chuckled, switching the phone to his other ear. "You can continue working as my publicity secretary for as long as you like. I'll talk to Emily and have her renew your contract so that you can be more assured of your future."

"Thanks a lot," Kristin replied. "That puts my heart at ease."

"Excellent," Zachary said. "I have to return to training now. But remember to handle the issue of the article as soon as possible. I already promised the coach that I would release the statement before the end of the day."

"Sure, I'll get to the task right away," Kristin said. "Enjoy your training and have a good day."

"Thanks, and have a good day too," Zachary said before ending the call. He immediately breathed a sigh of relief and returned to his training.

The following three days passed by quickly as he got busy. Aside from attending the team session to prepare for the Europa League game against Lyon, he spent his spare time training alone. He would either be in the gym or on the road jogging with the intent to condition himself early in the morning before sunrise. Then, in the evenings after the team sessions, he would practice his set-piece and dribbling skills before ending his day with a yoga session. He even spent some quality time with Camilla, who was as understanding and considerate as ever concerning his hectic schedule.

Eventually, Wednesday, April 2nd arrived, and Coach Johansen named the team facing off against Lyon that morning. Later in the afternoon, the players who'd made the coach's squad boarded a KLM airlines flight — and off they went and soared into the skies, heading off towards the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes region to play their first leg game of the Europa League's quarter-finals.

The plane touched down at the Lyon–Saint Exupéry Airport's runway five and a half hours later when the sun had long sunk beneath the horizon in the west. The players quickly followed the rest of the passengers out of the plane and headed toward the arrivals terminal. Before long, they collected their luggage and started making their way toward the airport's exit under the guidance of a UEFA guide.

But before they could make it out of the hallways of the airport, a group of fans and reporters interrupted them. Most of the fans were in Rosenberg's black and white jerseys, while the reporters were armed with microphones and large cameras.

"Zachary! An autograph."

"Zachary! We traveled all the way here to root for you. Please, squash those Lyon boys without mercy."

"Nicki, I'm a huge fan..."

"Takumi..."

The fans yelled at the top of their voices for the next few minutes. Some even tried to step forward and approach the Rosenberg players.

However, airport security was ready for them. The law enforcers kept the passionate fans at bay and didn't allow any of them to push through their blockade and close in on the players. They only permitted a few reporters to approach after confirming that Coach Johansen didn't mind his players talking to the reporters.

"What the hell?!"

Zachary was startled when he noticed the group of reporters quickly zeroing in on his position. The team had never gotten such an enthusiastic reception outside of Norway, not even when they traveled to Turin to play against Juventus. So, he was a bit shaken by the whole spectacle before him.

"Welcome to Lyon, Zachary Bemba," a reporter said as he shoved a microphone in front of his face.

Before Zachary could reply, the other men and women of the press stepped forwards and shoved more microphones into his face. They surrounded him like a cackle of starving hyenas that had just chanced upon a helpless rabbit deep in the jungle.

"We're pleased to have you here in Lyon, Zachary," another reporter hurriedly said, probably trying to beat his counterpart to the chance of interviewing Zachary. His eyes glittered as he signaled for his cameraman to start recording.

"Okay, ladies and gentlemen. One person at a time. Don't cause discomfort to the players, or I'll ask security to dismiss you."

The UEFA guide in charge of the team stepped forward at the right moment to save the situation. He worked with the security personnel to ensure that the chaotic reporters were not causing any distress to the players.

After a few more minutes, the reporters finally obeyed. They became more docile and orderly while approaching Zachary. At least they were no longer squeezing into him and shoving microphones into his face.

"Zachary! Welcome to Lyon."

Zachary quickly noticed that it was a beautiful reporter with blue eyes and long blonde hair tied in a ponytail who had spoken. Surprisingly, she was clad in a fitting Rosenberg number-8 top, which happened to be his own shirt number on the team. She looked strikingly dapper and chic, especially after pairing the jersey with stylish denim pants that emphasized her lithe figure.

A smile flickered across Zachary's face like a hologram as he immediately developed a favorable impression of her. Maybe, it was because of the Rosenberg jersey, but he found her pleasing to the eyes.

"Thanks for the warm welcome," he said, nodding at her. "By the way, that shirt looks really great on you."

Her eyes crinkled at the corners as she let out a soft chuckle. "What can I say," she said with a sigh. "I'm a huge fan. Zachary! You'll play against Lyon at an away ground tomorrow night. How do you feel?"

"I'm just looking forward to playing against one of the best teams in France," Zachary replied with a steady voice. "I feel excited and expectant."

"Do you think you can win?" She asked.

"Obviously, we can win," Zachary said. "We have prepared enough as a team, and we'll head into the game looking only for a win. The final result will depend on how Lyon responds to our attacks."

"You've been incredible in the Europa League this season," she said. "You're even the top scorer of the tournament. Should we expect another goal from you tomorrow night?"

"That, I can't be sure," Zachary replied with a smile. "Moreover, it doesn't matter whether I score or not. Instead, what matters is that we win the game. I'll be delighted even if our keeper is the one that bags that crucial goal that helps us win."

The reporter beamed and said, "Thank you for answering my questions, Zachary. I wish you all the luck in tomorrow's game."

"Thank you," Zachary replied and turned his attention away from her. He then spent the next few minutes answering a few more questions from the other reporters before stepping away with the intent to regroup with his teammates.

But just then, the pretty blonde reporter tapped his shoulder and whispered in his ear, "If you're up for some fun, you can call me any time after the game. My business card is in the left pocket of your jacket." She then turned around and walked away without saying another word.

Zachary's eyes widened. He quickly felt around his left pocket with his hand, and indeed there was the smooth piece of paper that was the business card lying in there. He was surprised as the lady had managed to place it in his pocket without his notice. Her pickpocketing skills were obviously at the grandmaster level.

"This is weird," Zachary mused as he removed his hand from his pocket. Since there were many eyes observing him at the moment, he decided to wait and deal with the business card later. He'd already resolved to throw it away as he didn't wish to associate with such a sharp reporter.

"Zachary," Coach Johansen shouted from a distance. "Have you been smitten senseless by the French ladies? Hurry up! The team bus is already outside."

"Aye, coach," Zachary replied as a wry smile outlined his face. He immediately slung his gym bag over his shoulder before following his teammates and coaches outside of the airport.

Chapter 353 Europa League Quarter-Final Preview

Kristin didn't manage to travel to Lyon to watch the game due to her tight schedule.

First and foremost, she had to deal with the publicity mess between Zachary and the reporter. Then she had to complete several course works imposed on her by her professors while also preparing for the end-of-semester exams. So, she could only catch the game on television in the comfort of her living room in Trondheim.

"Good evening, everyone," the voice of the female sports presenter sounded as the images on the screen switched to a TV studio. "It's another Europa League matchday. We'll be bringing you the live broadcast of the Europa League game between Olympique Lyonnais and Rosenborg Ballklub, scheduled to start in thirty minutes."

"I'm Emilia Vasquez, your presenter for the night, and with me here in the studio are two football greats who will be our pundits for the game. One is Ole Gunnar Solskjær, the newly-appointed manager of Cardiff City. He previously played for and coached Molde Football, the main rival of Rosenborg in Norway. So, I believe he understands the Europa League underdogs - Rosenborg quite well. Welcome, Ole!"

"Thank you, Emilia," Ole replied as the camera zoomed in on his face. "But don't let Coach Rémi Garde hear you calling Rosenborg underdogs. Otherwise, you'll be in for a hell of an argument."

Emilia chuckled. "We'll get to that in a few seconds. But first, let me also introduce our second pundit for the day. He's Juninho Pernambucano, a legend who scored seventy-five goals for Olympique Lyonnais. A good number of those goals were free kicks. Juninho, welcome!"

"Thank you, Emilia," Juninho replied as the cameras focused on him. "I'm pleased to be here."

Emilia smiled. "So, gentlemen," she said, "let's start with your predictions for this match."

Juninho laughed and shook his head. "I do believe and hope that Lyon will win the game. If Zachary Bemba doesn't perform abnormally again, a win of 2:1 or 2:0 is possible."

"What about you, Ole," Emilia questioned. "What's your prediction for the game between Lyon and Rosenborg?"

Ole sighed. "Honestly, I can't make a prediction before the game starts. On paper, Lyon seems like the stronger side. But let's not forget that Rosenborg is a team that eliminated Juventus and Fiorentina. They didn't just win against the Italian sides by narrow margins — but by scoring three or more goals across two legs. So, Rosenborg is a team that we can't take lightly, especially with their on-form playmaker - Zachary Bemba."

"So, we don't get a prediction from you, Ole?" Emilia asked again.

Ole smiled wryly before saying, "Let's go with a score of 1:0 in favor of Rosenborg. Either Zachary Bemba or Nicki Nielsen might bag the winning goal."

"Thank you," Emilia said. "Ole! A few seconds ago, you said something about not letting Coach Rémi Garde hear me calling Rosenborg an underdog. The statement reminded me about his pre-match press conference yesterday. I believe we should first watch it before we continue."

No sooner had Emilia finished her statement than the studio images on the screen faded in the background. Soon, the cleanly-shaven face of Rémi Garde, the head coach of Olympique Lyonnais, populated the screen. He was obviously answering questions during a press conference.

"Rémi!" Kristin immediately heard a male reporter's voice sounding through the television's speakers. "What is your view on your opponents in the Europa League quarter-final? Do you think you can end the incredible run of the underdogs in Europe?"

"That's funny." Coach Rémi Garde smiled and shook his head.

"What's funny?" The reporter queried.

"Calling a team that has eliminated Fiorentina and Juventus from the Europa League an underdog is definitely amusing," the Olympique Lyonnais coach said. "First, I would like to clarify this point. We'll not regard Rosenborg as a weaker team or an underdog during the quarter-final. Instead, we'll approach the game as if we're playing against some of the strongest clubs in Europe. We can't be careless when playing against a team that put five goals against Juventus."

As soon as the coach finished making the statement, his face faded into the background. Immediately, the screen started showing the images of the female presenter and the two pundits seated in the studio.

"Well, there you have it," Emilia Vasquez said, smiling. "During the pre-match press conference yesterday, the Lyon coach declared that he will treat Rosenborg as if it was a top team in Europe. Juninho! Do you think his attitude will impact the result of this game?"

"Definitely," Juninho replied, shifting slightly in his seat. "To a great extent, a match result depends on the team's attitude towards their opponents. Let's consider this game, for instance. Many might not agree, but Rosenborg has a strong squad comprising many young talents. If the Lyon coach treats the Norwegian side as the weaker opponent, we might see what happened during the first leg of the game between Juventus and Rosenborg transpiring again. But if he treats the match seriously and encourages all his players to give their all on the pitch, he will win."

"What about you, Ole?" Emilia asked, glancing at the Norwegian. "What do you think?"

"I think the result of this game will come down to two questions," Ole said. "One: Can Zachary Bemba put up another spectacular performance? Two: Will the Lyon players and their tactics be able to contain him? If we can answer those two questions, we can easily deduce the game's result."

Emilia chuckled. "You seem to have a lot of confidence in Zachary Bemba!"

"I do," Ole replied. "He's an incredible player. When I was coaching Molde last year, I researched him on several occasions, trying to find a way to contain him. He has crazy on-pitch statistics that can rival even those of the best players in the world. For instance, he has a hundred percent conversion rate of free kicks in the final third. That means that he has never missed a set-piece placed less than forty yards away from goal."

"Juninho!" Ole turned towards the Brazilian Maestro. "You used to convert a lot of free-kicks during your Lyon days. So, you should be able to comprehend what a hundred percent conversion statistic means."

Juninho smiled and shook his head. "If Zachary can maintain the hundred percent free-kick conversion statistic over the next three years, we should treat him as an alien in human skin. If he can maintain a fifty percent conversion rate in the same period, we give him the 'all-time greatest free-kick taker' title. That's because no player in history has ever achieved such a statistic."

"Except Zachary," Ole pointed out.

Juninho shook his head. "He has only taken a few free-kicks over a one-year period. The available data is not enough to judge if he can become the best."

"Gentlemen," Emilia interrupted. "The kick-off is only in twenty minutes. Let's talk about the squads that have just come in for the next few minutes."

"The Rosenborg coach has arrayed his team into a 4-5-1 formation," she continued. "In goal, there's Daniel Sletten, while the defense comprises the four players - Mikael Dorsin, Tore Reginiussen, Yerry Mina, and Eric Bailly. Thomas Partey, Zachary Bamba, Takumi Minamino, Tobias Mikkelsen, and Alexander Sørloth will be in the midfield. And finally, on striking is Nicki Nielsen."

"On the other hand, the Lyon coach has arranged his squad into a 4-3-1-2 formation. In goal for Lyon, there's Anthony Lopes, while the defense comprises the four players - Samuel Umtiti, Bakary Koné, Henri Bedimo, and Corentin Tolisso. And surprisingly, Coach Rémi Garde has fielded three defensive midfielders. They are Maxime Gonalons, Arnold Mvuemba, and Jordan Veretout."

"He's really taking Rosenborg seriously," Ole chimed in after hearing that part of the line-up. "With three defensive midfielders on the pitch, he will surely be defending most of the time."

"It's better to be cautious than to allow his team to concede two goals in the first few minutes like Juventus," Juninho countered.

Emilia smiled and continued reading the line-up. "In attacking midfield for Lyon is Steed Malbranque, while Alexandre Lacazette and Bafétimbi Gomis will play as the two forwards. Gentlemen! What are your views after seeing the two line-ups? What should we expect from this game?"

"Both teams will most likely play defensive football throughout the 90 minutes," Ole was the first to reply. "The 4-5-1 formation of Rosenborg and the 4-3-1-2 formation of Lyon clearly indicate the intent of the coaches to have their teams defend for a large part of the game. While on the attack, Rosenborg will probably utilize counterattacks while Lyon will use some long balls supported by wing play."

"The two Lyon attackers are very clinical," Juninho chipped in. "If the midfielders can feed them passes, they will surely score. On the side of Rosenborg, there's, of course, Zachary. He has already scored thirteen goals in the Europa League this season. He'll probably score again during this game if the three defensive midfielders don't manage to contain him."

"Thank you for the analyses, gentlemen," Emilia said. "For now, let's first take you to a short commercial break before we return with the live broadcast of the Europa League quarter-final game between Olympique Lyonnais and Rosenborg Ballklub. Stay tuned, and thank you for watching. We'll be back shortly." She smiled as her image faded away from the screen before giving way to the annoying ads.

Kristin didn't stay in front of the TV but immediately rushed to the kitchen with all the haste she could muster. In a short while, she returned with a bag of potato chips and settled back on the sofa. Her heart was already beating fast with anticipation as she looked forward to watching the game that would commence in a few minutes.

Chapter 354 Zachary versus the Lyon Fans

Both teams lined up in the tunnel at 8:55 PM. The Olympique Lyonnais players were in their white home kits, while the Rosenborg players had donned their black away jerseys.

Zachary stood at the back of the Rosenborg line. His tall physique looked imposing and sleek in his number eight jersey, while his untamed and somewhat messy Afro-hairstyle fanned out from the top of his head to add wild charm to his entire being. He seemed like a warrior about to head out to war in his black attire paired with his electric green Nike Mercurial Superfly football boots.

He wasn't idle as he stood there at the back of the line but observing the Lyon players. He'd already taken note of some famous footballers from his previous life, like Samuel Umtiti, Alexandre Lacazette, and Bafétimbi Gomis, within their ranks. They were obviously the roughest obstacles Rosenborg had to overcome in Lyon in order to win the game and qualify for the semi-finals.

"Let's move out."

The voice of one of the officials resounded through the tunnel a minute later. Rhythmic tapping sounds of footfalls upon the floor soon echoed as the referees and players commenced their short march towards the pitch. They soon exited the tunnel and lined up before the fans as the catchy Europa League anthem reverberated across the entire stadium.

The excitement was in the air as the kick-off was near. The supporters of both teams seemed to start competing among themselves to find out who was louder. One moment, a Lyon chant would reverberate across the entire stadium — but the next second, it would be the Rosenborg chant resonating from the stands like an explosion of celebratory fireworks.

Zachary was a bit stunned when he noticed the numbers of the Rosenborg fans in the stands. Even though it was an away game, they had traveled all the way from Trondheim to Lyon in droves to support the team. It was quite the improvement, especially when compared to the attendance during the previous Europa League matches, whereby there would only be hundreds of fans when Rosenborg played at an away ground.

The proceedings moved forward, and the customary handshakes soon followed before the players took their positions on the pitch. The referee then concluded the coin toss ceremony with the captains before positioning himself close to the center circle.

FWEEEEEEE

The whistle sounded at 9:05 PM, and the match started with Lyon's kick-off. The highly-anticipated quarter-final game between the French giants and that season's Europa League underdogs from Norway had finally commenced.

The Lyon players immediately settled into their 4-3-1-2 formation and started passing the ball around in the midfield. They narrowed down the spaces in the middle and ensured that Zachary and the rest of the Rosenborg players could not break through their ranks in the midfield.

Moreover, their formation with three holding midfielders allowed them many passing options, especially within the middle and defensive third. Thus, they outplayed Rosenborg by relying on stable and fluid short passes during the first eleven minutes of gameplay.

The game moved forward, and Maxime Gonalons received the ball close to the boundary of the middle third during the 15th minute. He immediately turned around and flicked it to Arnold Mvuemba, his counterpart in midfield.

Arnold Mvuemba immediately took a single touch on the ball to skip past Takumi Minamino, who had just closed him down. Then, he twisted and spun around to get further away from the opponent before passing the ball towards the backfield. He was probably hoping to find Bakary Koné, the Lyon center-back.

However, Nicki Nielsen, the Rosenborg center-forward lurking in the space between the defenders, glided in swiftly to intercept the pass. He managed to get to the ball on the stretch and then shoved it towards Tobias Mikkelsen with the tip of his boot.

The steal was successful in the 16th minute of gameplay, and the Lyon players clearly showed signs of panicking as Tobias controlled the ball on the right side of the box.

The left-back, Henri Bedimo, was in an even more agitated state. He closed in on Tobias swiftly before sliding in wholesale to tackle the ball. But he mistimed his tackle and swept the Rosenborg right-winger off his feet before getting to the ball.

"Aaahhh!"

Tobias let out a sharp cry as he rolled around several times after tumbling to the ground. His eyes misted a bit as he held on to his ankle. He was clearly in a lot of pain.

FWEEEEEEE

The referee blew the whistle and rushed to the scene. He immediately summoned the physicians, who started tending to the Rosenborg winger. However, all their efforts were fruitless, and Tobias couldn't

get back on his feet. The medics even had to carry the winger off the pitch on a stretcher a few minutes later.

"Ref! That was clearly a high boot," Mikael Dorsin complained while facing the referee.

"Moreover, it seemed intentional," Tore Reginiussen, the Rosenborg captain, chimed in. "Instead of going for the ball, he obviously grazed Tobias' ankle with his studs."

More Rosenborg players, including Zachary, soon encircled the referee and voiced their complaints. Their intent was, of course, to push him to show a straight red card to the defender.

However, the referee didn't do as they hoped. After calmly listening to their complaints, he only showed a yellow card to Henri Bedimo, the defender who'd committed the foul. He then signaled the Rosenborg players to start preparing for the free-kick before marching off to organize the wall.

"Zachary, it's up to you now," Mikael said as he placed the ball in his hands. "Do as usual and try to hit the target. Don't let the pressure get to you."

"Don't worry. I'll do my best."

Zachary nodded and received the ball before positioning it on the spot marked out by the referee. All the while, he was already assessing and deducing how to place the set piece.

He wondered whether he should go for the inside of the near or the far post. As both options seemed appealing, he couldn't decide immediately.

The set-piece spot was on the right side of the box and about 21 yards away from the goal. It was also at a very acute angle, making the chances of converting the free-kick extremely slim. But Zachary didn't panic as he'd already figured that he could overcome all obstacles with a curling ball over the defense. So, he confidently stepped back from the ball while watching the referee arranging the defensive wall.

But just then, his ears picked up some unsettling loud noises emerging from the stands behind the goal. On glancing up, he realized that the die-hard supporters of Lyon had started booing him with all their

hearts. They paired demeaning curses with his name and showed him their middle fingers. They probably wished to spook him and disturb his confidence so that he would miss the set-piece.

"Just ignore them," Mikael said, patting his shoulder. "Focus on the task at hand and shut out everything else. We believe in you."

"Don't worry. Such cheap tricks won't work on me."

A confident smile outlined Zachary's face as he activated the Dead-Ball-Specialist Juju. The next instant, he felt a refreshing sensation flooding his entire being, and the curses and boos became like background noise. His spirits brightened, and his mind grew calmer and sharper.

FWEEEEEEE

The referee blew the whistle a few seconds later after arranging the players in the box. The curses and boos grew louder as Zachary took an angled run towards the ball. However, all that didn't matter to him one bit. His attention was on the ball, the defensive wall, and a few spots between the goalposts.

Without losing composure, he drew back his left leg before whacking the ball with the instep part of his boot. His technique was as perfect as usual, and he made sure to hit the ball slightly towards its side.

Whoosh!

The ball rose from the ground with an abnormal spin. It cut through the air fast and darted around the wall, seemingly on a trajectory that was a few meters away from the far post. But then, at the last moment, it dipped and curled weirdly before grazing the far post and nestling into the back of the net.

The keeper had tried to save the situation with a despairing dive. But his fingertips couldn't even graze the ball. He was too late to react — and as a result, had allowed Rosenborg to score the first goal in the 19th minute.

Silence!

The rowdy Lyon fans immediately fell silent as they tried to process the new circumstances. But all that didn't concern Zachary.

He didn't stay in the same spot when he saw the ball in the back of the net. He ran to the sidelines before bending in front of the camera and placing a finger on his lips. His simple celebration was the only response to the Lyon fans, who had tried to disturb his confidence right before the set-piece.

"BOOO! BOOO..."

But his actions seemed to have stirred up a hornets' nest in the stadium, and the fans started booing him again. They forgot their sorrow of conceding the goal and cursed and demeaned him with renewed vigor. The atmosphere became that crazy in those few minutes after the goal. Going by the way things were proceeding, he was in for a hellish night with the Lyon fans.

Chapter 355 Teamwork and Creativity

Coach Johansen nodded to himself with a smile as he watched his players celebrating the goal. He then pumped his fist into the air a few times before turning around and focusing on the group of substitutes warming up on the sidelines.

Since Tobias had gotten injured, he had to replace him with another player who could attack and defend well on the wing. The substitute also needed to have the ability to draw fouls from the defenders so as to create more chances for Zachary to score set-pieces.

Coach Johansen's gaze soon settled on Karl Toko Ekambi, the 21-year-old winger he'd recently signed from Paris FC. But after a few seconds of consideration, he turned his eyes away.

Karl Toko Ekambi was, of course, a great player who could play perfectly while on the attack through both wings. But his only weakness was his limited defensive ability. So, the coach didn't require his services in a game where players needed to defend more than they would attack.

Rapid thoughts continued whirling around Coach Johansen's mind, and finally, he zeroed in on Paul Kasongo, the young winger who had performed incredibly over the weekend. He was the perfect substitute at that moment as he possessed the stamina and pace to defend and attack through the flanks.

"Kasongo!" He yelled out to him. "Come."

"Aye, coach." The short winger immediately stepped forward as his eyes glinted with excitement.

"In a bit," Coach Johansen said, "You'll sub in for Tobias and play as our right-winger. You will need to exert yourself to defend and attack through the flanks. And if there's an opportunity, you need to try and force free-kicks out of the defenders so that we can give Zachary a chance to convert more free-kicks. Clear?"

"Yes, coach," Kasongo replied enthusiastically.

"Good." Coach Johansen nodded. "You can go and prepare. I want you on the pitch in less than two minutes."

"Aye, coach."

The game restarted before Kasongo could come on for the injured Tobias. The Lyon players didn't seem like they were in a panicked state even after conceding the goal. Instead, they immediately took advantage of their brief numerical advantage to launch a fierce attack against Rosenborg. They used short passes to move the ball through the middle for a couple of minutes until it ended at Jordan Ferri's feet.

Jordan Ferri, the Lyon midfielder, controlled the ball well before skipping past Takumi Minamino with a swift change of direction. When the angle opened up, he unleashed a long pass towards the other side of the pitch, where Alexandre Lacazette was lurking.

Alexandre Lacazette battled Yerry Mina for aerial superiority before heading the ball towards Bafétimbi Gomis, his counterpart on striking.

Gomis swiftly brought the ball under control and immediately skipped past Eric Bailly to step into Rosenborg's box. He managed to open up the shooting angle with another simple touch before unleashing a curling shot towards the bottom left corner.

Coach Johansen felt his heart sink as he watched the ball darting towards the goal like an arrow. But the next moment, his tight nerves loosened when Daniel Þorlund, the Rosenborg keeper, intercepted the effort with an outstretched boot. The experienced number-one had saved Rosenborg from conceding an equalizing goal during the 23rd minute.

FWEEEEEEEE

The referee blew the whistle and pointed toward the corner flag.

Coach Johansen breathed a sigh of relief as he'd avoided a goal and also gotten a chance to make a substitution for the injured Tobias.

"Fourth official," he yelled. "Signal for the substitution. We can't continue playing with only ten men."

The fourth official nodded and stepped towards the touchline. When the on-pitch referee gave him the go-ahead, he immediately raised his board, and Kasongo ran onto the pitch. The substitution had finally allowed Rosenborg to even out the numbers after playing with only ten men for about four minutes.

FWEEEEEEEE

The referee blew the whistle and signaled for the Lyon players to take the corner kick. Corentin Tolisso, Lyon's right-back, floated a tricky ball towards the box.

Alexandre Lacazette immediately escaped his mark before leaping high in the air to connect with the descending corner ball. He timed his jump well to plant a header towards the goal from the boundary of the penalty box.

It was a tense moment for Rosenborg as the ball was on a straight course towards the inside of the right post. However, at the very last instant, Daniel Þorlund, the Rosenborg keeper, came to the rescue once

again. He committed himself to a full-body dive before diverting the shot away from its intended trajectory with his fingertips.

But the hearts of most Rosenberg fans were still in their throats as the danger was still at large. They were still tense as the ball smashed off the goalpost the next moment before rebounding into the box.

The players of both teams scrambled after the ball while pushing and pulling at each other's shirts. But in the end, it was Zachary who got to it first.

Zachary didn't lose composure even while surrounded by opponents within his own box. He brought the ball under control with an outstretched boot before executing a simple Marseille turn to escape the tight encirclement of the Lyon players. And when the passing angle opened up, he immediately flicked the ball toward Kasongo, who was lurking on the right-wing.

Kasongo controlled the ball well on the right flank and then took off towards the other side of the pitch like the wind. But after sprinting a few yards, he ran into the blockade of Arnold Mvuemba, Lyon's holding midfielder. So, he could only turn around and pass the ball towards the middle to find Zachary, who was catching up from behind.

Zachary controlled the ball mid-sprint, and the booing around the stadium rose to a crescendo. Since the Lyon fans seemed to hold a grudge against him, they were once again on their feet, cursing and jeering at him with pure loathing and hate.

But Zachary seemed not to mind the hostility of the Lyon fans and kept on sprinting towards the other side of the pitch like a bullet train on the rails. Soon, he stepped past the center-line, and Jordan Ferri, the other holding midfielder, who'd stayed back to defend, tried to stop his run.

Zachary immediately executed a few side steps and circumvented the defender from the right with another burst of speed. But just then, he ran into a fierce tackle from Bakary Koné, another player who'd been covering the back during the corner kick.

Bakary Koné slid in fast from his blindside and swept him off his feet the next instant. Before he could react, he was already tumbling toward the ground.

FWEEEEEEEE

The referee blew the whistle and rushed to the scene. He immediately awarded a free-kick to Rosenborg before cautioning Bakary Koné verbally. He didn't even show the defender a yellow card for committing the dangerous tackle.

In the stands behind Lyon's goal, the Lyon fans were chattering and cheering loudly. Bakary Koné's tackle on Zachary seemed to have excited them considerably.

"What an impressive tackle," one fan remarked loudly. "Koné managed to take down that piece of shit beautifully."

"Yes, it was indeed a splendid tackle," another fan said, grinning from ear to ear. "I really hope that Zachary has gotten injured. If he doesn't stand up again, we'll benefit."

"I think that that tackle was a bit of a light punishment on him," another fan said, shaking his head. "If Koné had raised his boot a bit higher, the tackle would have been more magnificent."

"You're right," the first fan agreed. "I can't believe that the little shit came to our home and tried to shut us down. How dare he?"

Zachary picked himself off the ground and performed a few ankle stretches. He only breathed a sigh of relief after confirming that he hadn't gotten himself injured.

But just as he was beginning to relax, his ears picked up more jeers and curses from the Lyon fans. They started booing his name again, causing him to wonder whether he'd unknowingly killed their relatives.

"Just ignore them," Mikael said when he walked up to him a few seconds later. "They know that your skills pose a huge threat to their team. So, they're doing their best to destabilize your psyche. You can't let them win against you."

"I understand. Don't worry."

Zachary was slightly riled up as he turned his attention away from the fans. He breathed in deeply to calm himself down before returning his focus to the crucial issues at hand.

Since the free-kick was about fifty-five yards away, he couldn't take a direct shot towards the goal. He had to send a curling ball towards the back of the defense and let his teammates do the rest of the work.

But Zachary soon determined that such an approach couldn't yield any results. He was sure that Lyon's defense, comprising players like Samuel Umtiti and Bakary Koné, would clear the high ball without any challenges. So, if he wished to gain something out of the free-kick, he had to look for a better plan.

Zachary's mind immediately started working in overdrive as he observed Lyon's defense. He soon noticed how the Lyon defenders had set up the backline a good number of yards away from their box, and then a bold idea came to him. Since they seemed intent on utilizing an offside trap, he would use it against them.

"Mikael," he said, glancing at the left-back. "You should be the one to take this free-kick. Let's try out something new."

"What do you have in mind?" Mikael asked after leaning closer.

Zachary smiled and whispered in his ear for a few seconds.

Mikael nodded with a smile and placed the ball on the free-kick spot.

FWEEEEEEE

The referee blew the whistle and signaled for Rosenborg to take the free-kick a few seconds later.

Zachary nodded to Mikael and immediately took off towards Lyon's box with all the haste he could muster. Since he'd already assigned Mikael his role, he also needed to do his part to complete the free-kick move. He didn't look back as his long strides ate up yards of space like there was no tomorrow.

Coach Johansen's heart raced with anticipation when he watched Zachary accelerate towards Lyon's box right after the whistle. The boy prodigy circumvented opponents like a rugby player and made it to the Lyon backline in less than six seconds.

And just then, at the moment before Zachary stepped into an offside position, Mikael took the free-kick. He unleashed a curling ball that soared over the defense and started to descend towards the edge of the box a few seconds later.

The free-kick was right on point, and since it was unexpected, it had managed to catch all the Lyon defenders unawares. Thus, there wasn't any opponent in Zachary's vicinity when he controlled the ball at the edge of the box. Without losing composure, he stepped past the keeper who'd come out to meet him with a couple of side steps before burying the ball into the back of the net.

Chapter 356 Juninho was at a Loss for Words

After scoring the goal, Zachary raced towards Mikael Dorsin, the teammate who'd provided the incredible assist, and gave him a bear hug. As for the angry Lyon fans, he decided to ignore them since he couldn't come out on top if he engaged in a verbal fight against the crowd. As a professional footballer, he'd already resolved to respond to their taunts and jeers not with words or gestures — but with just more goals.

However, Mikael Dorsin, Rosenborg's assistant captain, refused to follow his example. The left-back excused himself from the group of celebrating players before rushing towards the stands behind the Lyon goal. Then, he grinned and spread out his hands before pressing them behind his ears.

The defender's message was obviously, 'I'm celebrating the goal. So, please, I can't hear you.'

The Lyon fans were immediately enraged. They booed and hurled out insults with renewed intensity for the next few seconds. Some even started throwing firecrackers onto the pitch to let out their anger until stadium security stepped in to calm the situation down.

It was only after a whole five minutes that the chaos ended. But before the game could restart, the referee summoned Mikael and showed him a yellow card for his unsportsmanlike behavior of agitating the fans.

"You shouldn't have taunted the fans," Zachary said to Mikael. "What if the ref decided to show you a red card instead? We would have been in deep shit."

"Don't worry," Mikael said, patting his shoulder. "I know what I'm doing. And, of course, I couldn't allow the fans to keep cursing at you without hitting back."

"Thanks for looking out for me." Zachary smiled. "But seriously, it doesn't matter whether they boo me or not. What matters is that we win the game and move a step closer to the semi-finals."

"I understand," Mikael said, nodding. "Gameplay is about to restart. Let's head back to our positions."

Due to the chaos in the stands, the game only restarted after a six-minute break. The Lyon players immediately relied on their 4-3-1-2 formation to overpower Rosenborg in the middle of the field. Before long, they dictated the tempo and hoarded more than 70% percent of the ball possession. And as the proceedings headed into the late stages of the 1st half, they even switched from defensive to attacking tactics.

Team Lyon soon started launching fierce attacks on Rosenborg's goal by relying on long through-balls to Alexandre Lacazette and Bafétimbi Gomis. The momentum was clearly on Lyon's side as the two impressive forwards tested Rosenborg's defense repeatedly, searching for that crucial opening goal.

However, all the Rosenborg players defended with one heart. They parked the team bus in front of their goal and thwarted all the goal-scoring opportunities created by the Lyon players. It was as if they had given up on attacking for the rest of the game to concentrate only on defense.

But during the 42nd minute, when the Lyon players had just stepped up a gear to become more aggressive with their attacks, a swift change transpired on the pitch.

A poor cross from Corentin Tolisso, the Lyon right-back, gave Eric Bailly a chance to battle Alexandre Lacazette for aerial superiority within the box. The Ivorian leaped high to meet the incoming ball with his head before clearing it to safety. And fortunately, his clearance happened to find its way to Nicki Nielsen, the Rosenborg striker lurking close to the touchline on the right flank.

Nicki brought the ball under control with his chest. He then zipped past a challenge from Henri Bedimo, the Lyon left-back, before squaring a pass to Thomas Partey. With that swift and smooth transition, he'd managed to initiate a counterattack.

Thomas Partey's gaze swept past Zachary's position as he controlled the ball from Nicki. But he immediately noticed that three opponents were surrounding the young playmaker. So, he could only choose to pass the ball to Takumi Minamino, the other attack-minded midfielder.

Takumi took a single touch on the ball before unleashing a raking pass towards the right-wing. The Japanese midfielder's vision was impressive, and he managed to seek out Paul Kasongo, who had just made a daring run through the right-wing.

Kasongo seemed confident as he brought the ball under control close to the touchline. And since no opponent was marking him, he immediately took off towards Lyon's box like the wind.

The short guy was abnormally swift and managed to cover a distance of more than seven yards in a couple of seconds. But just as he was approaching the box from the right side, he ran into a fierce tackle from Bakary Koné. The Lyon center-back slid in wholesale to sweep the short guy off his feet.

FWEEEEEEE

The referee blew the whistle and rushed to the scene. He immediately showed Bakary Koné a yellow card before awarding a free-kick to Rosenborg only a few yards away from the box.

A wave of silence soon descended upon the stadium as Zachary picked up the ball and positioned it on the spot marked out by the referee. Surprisingly, the Lyon fans were no longer booing or cursing at him. Instead, most had already placed their hands behind their heads while others were biting on their lips. They were obviously worried about the situation on the pitch.

"Do you think he will score?" A young man in the stands behind Lyon's goal asked his friend.

"I don't know," his friend replied while massaging his temples. "Damn it! What are the players doing? Why are they conceding free-kicks close to our box?"

His friend didn't reply. He only shook his head silently before returning all his attention to the field of play.

On the pitch, the referee had finished arranging the defensive wall. It was a long wall comprising seven Lyon players who had lined up a yard or two inside their box, hoping to stop Zachary from scoring another free-kick against them.

Zachary assessed the wall for a few seconds before stepping back from the ball and activating the Dead-Ball-Specialist Juju. When the referee blew the whistle and gave the go-ahead, he nodded and proceeded forward like usual.

He made a short angled run towards the ball before making the last jump-step to position his support foot beside the ball. He then swung his foot down hard and fast to hit the ball with the instep part of his boot.

His technique, honed over thousands of repetitions during training, was as immaculate as ever. He managed to wrap his foot around the ball before sending it on a curling trajectory above the wall. Before the keeper could react, it dipped fast and homed into the top left corner of the net.

Olympique Lyonnais 0 : Rosenborg BK 3

The cheers of the Rosenborg fans in the stadium hit a thunderous crescendo when Zachary raised his arms to celebrate the goal. They jumped around in their seats and sang Rosenborg's victory chants for the next few seconds. They could hardly contain their excitement as their team was already leading by three goals during the first half of the Europa League quarter-finals.

FWEEEEEEEE

The referee blew the whistle after the celebrations, and the game restarted. The Lyon players couldn't seem to focus after conceding the third goal. They misplaced a few passes and even gifted another counterattacking opportunity to Rosenborg after a few more minutes of gameplay.

However, just as the Rosenborg players had initiated another fierce counter-offensive against Lyon, the referee blew the half-time whistle. The Rosenborg players could only sigh with disappointment before trekking off the pitch and marching towards the tunnel.

Emilia Vasquez, the ESPN sports presenter, breathed deeply and smiled at the cameras. Her heart was still palpitating with excitement as her mind recalled the action during the first half.

"Welcome back from the Olympique Lyonnais versus Rosenborg first-half action," she said. "Only three chances! Three free-kicks! Three shots on target! Three goals from Zachary Bemba during the first half! Gentlemen, what is your take on the first half?" She turned towards the two pundits in the studio.

Juninho immediately shook his head and smiled wryly. "I'm at a loss for words," he said with an audible sigh. "The proceedings on the pitch are simply a shocker to me. I don't even understand how Rosenborg is three goals ahead before half-time."

Emilia smiled. "What about you, Ole? What's your take on the first half?"

"I'm obviously shocked and stunned," Ole said with a smile. "But I think I'm a bit more accepting towards the results of the first half than my friend here." He patted Juninho's shoulder.

Emilia chuckled. "Tell us about the first half. Why do you think Lyon is behind by three goals even after dominating possession for a large part of the game?"

Ole sighed. "As Conte said in his previous interview after Rosenborg's match against Juventus, the difference between the two sides is only Zachary Bemba. Whenever he gets an opportunity during the game, he converts it to give Rosenborg an edge against their opponents. As we all noticed during the first half, Lyon is behind by three goals because they didn't manage to contain him."

Chapter 357 Overwhelming Victory

Emilia raised a brow after hearing Ole's response. "Are you implying that the opponents were not marking him? From what I saw, three Lyon players were constantly circling around his position during the entire game."

Ole shook his head. "They obviously didn't do enough to contain him. Or maybe, he was too much for them, and they couldn't handle him. Emilia! You have to understand that incredible players only need a couple of seconds to create and finish off goal-scoring chances on the pitch. If you blunder even once or turn your attention away from an incredible player like Zachary for even a few seconds, he will punish you."

"Lyon obviously played good football during the first half," Ole continued. "They hoarded all the possession while also containing Zachary with their tactics. However, they lost their focus on a few occasions and conceded those free-kicks, and that's why Rosenborg is ahead by three goals during the first half."

"Thanks, Ole," Emilia said before turning towards Juninho. "Juninho! All Zachary's three goals were a result of free-kicks. Two of them were direct set-pieces a few yards away from the box, and he managed to convert them without losing his composure. You're the expert. What can you tell us about his technique?"

"His technique is flawless and reminds me of David Beckham's curveballs," Juninho replied. "His motions while taking the set-pieces are textbook perfect, and he always manages to place the ball where he wants without losing his composure."

"I also realized that his mental ability is quite high. The fans were booing him and giving him hell, but he didn't flinch while converting the set-pieces. Such a feat takes nerves of steel — which is an attribute that also makes him a cold-blooded assassin whenever he's about to take a set-piece. If he can maintain his consistency over the next few years, he'll surely become one of the greatest free-kick takers in history."

"Thanks, Juninho," Emilia said, smiling. "I'm still confused about one thing, though. Coach Rémi Garde insisted that he would treat Rosenborg as a strong opponent. And from his set-up of the squad, I expected Lyon to employ ultra-defensive tactics to contain Zachary and the rest of the Rosenborg players. But just after 45 minutes, Lyon is already trailing by three goals. Juninho! Where did Lyon go wrong? Are the players not doing enough? Or were Coach Rémi Garde's tactics not suitable for the game?"

Juninho smiled slightly. "I don't think there is anything wrong with Coach Rémi Garde's tactics. His game plan has enabled Lyon to keep Zachary quiet for most of the first half. That's except for those three chances, of course. The issue should be with the Lyon players, instead."

"As Ole said," Juninho continued, "the players lost focus a few times during the first half and conceded free-kicks close to their box. In so doing, they gifted the on-form Zachary clear chances to score those three goals. If I were a Lyon defender, I would have allowed either Tobias or Kasongo to have a go at goal rather than committing a foul and gifting Zachary a chance to convert a set-piece near the box."

"Thanks, Juninho," Emilia said. "But first, let's head into a commercial break before returning with more analyses and the preview of the second half. Stay tuned, and don't touch that dial. We'll be back shortly."

Olympique Lyonnais was like a totally different team after half-time. From the first minute of the second half, the men in white attacked fiercely and dominated proceedings on the field of play with more than 75% ball possession. It was as if their lives were on the line as they exerted themselves, trying to create an opportunity to score the first goal. And eventually, their efforts almost paid off during the 70th minute.

Steed Malbranque, the Lyon attacking midfielder, connected with a pass from Samuel Umtiti at the border of the final third. He brought the ball under control with his chest before whirling around to escape the harassment of Thomas Partey, Rosenborg's defensive midfielder.

The Lyon attacking midfielder then unleashed a lofted ball over the defense to find Alexandre Lacazette. His well-timed pass caught the Rosenborg backline unawares and released the striker on a straight course towards the goal.

Alexandre Lacazette brought the ball under control without any pressure and immediately took another touch before stepping into Rosenborg's box. The next moment, he glanced up once before drawing his leg back and unleashing a curling shot over the keeper, who'd come out from between the posts to meet him.

The cheers all around the stadium hit a thunderous crescendo as the ball made its way past the outstretched fingertips of Daniel Rønd, the Rosenborg keeper. But the next moment, sighs and curses, tinged with disappointment, emerged from the stands as the ball smashed off the post before heading out of play for a goal kick.

What a missed opportunity!!

Alexandre Lacazette, the often clinical danger-man of Lyon, had gotten a clear chance to score Lyon's first goal during the 71st minute. But he'd narrowly missed by hitting the post. The frustration seemed to be killing him, and he punched the grass a couple of times in anguish.

On the sidelines, Coach Johansen was tense. His entire being was still palpitating with anxiety as he recalled Alexandre Lacazette's missed opportunity.

If the striker had angled his shot just an inch to the left, the French giants would have narrowed the goal difference to only two goals. Then, if they happened to score another goal before the 90 minutes elapsed, Rosenborg would be in for a tough time during the second leg.

"No, I have to play it safe during the remaining minutes," Coach Johansen decided before pivoting his gaze onto the substitutes' bench. He immediately summoned Ole Selnø and Mike Jensen and started giving them instructions.

"You two will be subbing on for Alexander Sørensen and Nicki Nielsen," he said. "I want you to help out in defensive midfield so as to prevent the Lyon attackers from creating more chances. Your only role on the pitch will be to protect our defense. There's no need for you two to leave your positions to attack during the remaining 18 minutes of gameplay. Are we clear?"

"Yes, coach," the two players replied in unison.

"Good," Coach Johansen nodded. "When you enter the pitch, pass on my instructions to the rest of the players. Inform them that everyone is to sit tight in defense during the remaining minutes. Our only objective is to avoid conceding a goal during this game."

"What about Zachary?" Mike Jensen asked. "He usually has a free role on the team. Should we also tell him to sit tight in defense for the remaining few minutes?"

Coach Johansen's eyes narrowed as he said, "Zachary will be our only attacker on the field for the rest of the game. So, if there's an opportunity, he can still have a go at Lyon's defense. But all the other players must remain defensive-minded to ensure that we don't concede. That means that we'll play nine or ten men in-between the ball and our goal. Are we clear?"

"Yes, coach," the two players replied.

"Good," Coach Johansen said. "Get ready. I want you on the pitch in less than five minutes."

The two Rosenborg substitutes entered the pitch when the ball went out of play for a Lyon throw-in four minutes later. After the switch, the Rosenborg players immediately arrayed themselves in a sort of 4:6:0 formation.

It was soon clear to all that Rosenborg had given up all their attackers, including their star striker - Nicki Nielsen, to focus only on defending. But of course, Zachary was the only player allowed by the coach to leave his defensive role in midfield and launch an attack when he saw an opportunity.

The game continued, and the Lyon players utilized short passes to continue hoarding more than 70% of the possession. And since there were no Rosenborg attackers to threaten their backline, they grew more confident and sent more numbers forward. Their two wing-backs made bold runs through the flanks while the holding midfielders attacked through the middle, searching for that opening goal.

However, the Rosenborg players remained steadfast in defense. They packed a massive double-decker bus before their goal and resisted Lyon's barrage of attacks as if their lives depended on the game. Thanks to their efforts, the game remained 3:0 in favor of Rosenborg even as the proceedings headed into injury time.

The Lyon players became more frustrated as the end of the game drew closer. They became more hurried in their attempts to search for a goal and started committing some amateur mistakes. And finally, their impatience cost them during the 93rd minute, with only two minutes of injury time remaining to the end of the game.

Henri Bedimo, the Lyon left-back who had pushed forward, tried to break into Rosenborg's box through the left flank. But in the end, he ran into Eric Bailly's blockade and lost the ball at the edge of the box.

Mike Jensen, the substitute midfielder, picked up the loose ball and immediately passed it to Takumi Minamino. The latter whirled around to escape Steed Malbranque's harassment before squaring a pass to Zachary, who'd just run into an unmarked pocket of space on the left flank.

Zachary received the ball close to the touchline and whirled around to face Lyon's goal. His incredible spatial awareness worked wonders — and in nothing but an instant, he noticed a rare open highway from his position to the other side of the pitch. The Lyon players seemed to have ignored the space on the flanks when they became frustrated and started attacking in droves. So, it was totally unobstructed without anyone to block his way.

"Chance!"

Adrenaline flooded Zachary's bodily systems as he took off like a rocket flying into outer space. He accelerated to his apex velocity within a few seconds as he continued feeding the ball in front of him. Before long, he stepped past the centerline and continued bearing on Lyon's goal like a raging cyclone.

For that counterattack, he didn't utilize any fancy tricks. He didn't even perform a single sidestep as no opponents were blocking his path. He just exploded with pure speed as his long strides ate up yards of space like an incarnation of Usain bolt on a one-hundred-meter racing track.

His breathing became more labored as he pumped his legs like the pistons of a race car. But he held on with sheer willpower before cutting into the pitch and heading straight towards Lyon's goal like a predator on the hunt.

Anthony Lopes, the Lyon keeper, came out of goal to meet him. The goalie rushed forward, all guns blazing as if he wanted to murder someone. His expression at that moment could have scared a young kid into having nightmares for the next few months.

However, Zachary wasn't unnerved in the slightest. He slowed down before stepping over the ball once. When the keeper bought his dummy and leaned to the left, Zachary immediately exploded with speed once again. He rushed past the keeper's right side and finally stepped into Lyon's box.

But just then, he noticed that two Lyon players had managed to insert themselves in front of the goal. They seemed to have rushed straight through the middle and caught up when he'd slowed down to draw in the keeper.

Zachary remained composed and drew his leg back as if he was about to take a shot. Bakary Koné, one of the defenders, immediately reacted to his feint and slid in wholesale with the intent to block his effort.

Zachary relaxed his leg and merely took a simple touch on the ball to push it an inch further forward.

Samuel Umtiti, the second defender, also seemed to think that Zachary was about to take the shot. He flew in, trying his utmost to prevent Zachary from scoring. In the end, he also landed on his butt after falling for the feint.

"That was easy."

Zachary smiled and chipped a simple ball into the back of the net to score Rosenberg's fourth goal without any pressure. He then sped towards the corner flag before sliding on his knees for a few yards to celebrate the goal.

His teammates joined him a few seconds later. They gave him bear hugs and soon started singing a Rosenberg victory chant. They could hardly contain their excitement as they were on the cusp of accomplishing an overwhelming victory against Lyon in the quarter-finals of the Europa League.

Chapter 358 Analysis and Speculation

The game continued after the goal celebrations. The Olympique Lyonnais players seemed not to have given up yet, even after conceding the fourth goal. They launched another fierce attack against Rosenberg during the final minutes of added time. They passed the ball immaculately around the middle until they picked out Bafétimbi Gomis, the striker who had just escaped from Yerry Mina's harassment.

Bafétimbi Gomis received the ball and whirled around to create space for himself at the edge of the box. He then unleashed a powerful shot towards the goal when the angle opened up.

But his efforts were fruitless once again as his shot soon met a roadblock in the form of Eric Bailly. The Rosenberg defender slid in fast to intercept the ball and send it out of play with an outstretched leg.

FWEEEEEEEE

The referee blew the whistle and pointed toward the corner flag.

The Lyon players quickly flooded into Rosenberg's box, hoping to score at least a consolation goal before the end of that night's proceedings. Soon, they started creating chaos in the box as they pushed and pulled at their opponents' shirts to create some space for themselves.

The tension was high in Rosenberg's box for the next minute, and the referee even had to step in and control the situation by cautioning some Lyon players. Otherwise, they might have come to blows with the Rosenberg players there in the box.

FWEEEEEEE

The referee finally blew the whistle and signaled for team Lyon to take the corner kick after calming the players' tempers down.

Jordan Ferri, the Lyon midfielder, immediately unleashed a tricky cross towards the crowded box from the corner spot.

The players of both teams pushed up from the ground to meet the ball descending into the box. But in the end, it was Yerry Mina, the tall Rosenborg center-back, who got the better of everyone else. He outjumped the rest and cleared the ball out of the box with his head.

FWEEEEEEE

It was then that the referee blew the whistle and brought the proceedings for the night to a close. After 96 minutes of intense action, the first leg of the Europe League quarter-finals had finally ended with Rosenborg overwhelming Lyon by four goals to nil.

The night was like a dream come true for the Rosenborg players. They soon started running around the pitch while yelling at the top of their voices to celebrate their victory. But a few minutes later, they had to cut their celebrations short as chaos descended upon the stadium.

The ugly side of football reared its hideous head as several dozens of supporters started pushing against the safety barriers held by the stewards. They continuously hurled out curses and insults as they tried to break past the security blockade and invade the stadium.

The situation soon turned more chaotic and out of control. As a result, the players and coaches of both teams could only return to their respective dressing rooms to avoid the mess.

The mood in Rosenborg's dressing room was jolly even with all the chaos outside in the stadium. Both coaches and players sang and danced like crazed fellows for minutes. They could hardly contain their

excitement since they'd just made history by thrashing Lyon 4:0 away from home. They only needed to defend well during the second leg at Lerkendal, and then they would qualify for the Europa League semi-finals.

"Good game!" Coach Johansen said as he gave Zachary a bear hug. "And damn! You were really composed when you scored the fourth goal. The Lyon defenders will suffer nightmares, thinking about the goal for at least a few weeks."

"Thanks, coach," Zachary replied with a smile. His spirits were already shooting through the roof and soaring high up into the skies. Waves of contentment continuously warmed him from within as he'd scored four goals and won the match ball again.

In the ESPN studio, Emilia smiled at the cameras. "What a surprising game," she said. "We all expected a match with a few goals. But in the end, Zachary Bemba pulled out all stops to ensure that his team, Rosenborg, thrashed Lyon by four goals to nil. What an incredible player!"

"Yes, what an incredible player, indeed," Juninho chimed in. "We're witnessing the rise of a very great player who can compete with the best of the best in history. He's just 19 years old — but already playing like this! If he can continue maturing, I just can't begin to imagine how deadly he'll be in a few years."

"You're right, Juninho," Ole said. "He's already scored seventeen goals in the Europa League this season. Jonathan Soriano, the RB Salzburg striker second on the list of top scorers, is just at eleven goals. But as we all know, Red Bull Salzburg is already out of the competition. So, Zachary will most likely take the Europa League golden boot this season, which is quite a big achievement for a young man who has just clocked 19-years."

Emilia smiled and said, "Gentlemen! Let's talk about the fourth goal. I keep having goosebumps every time I recall that goal during the 93rd minute."

"The goal was incredible," Juninho said with a smile. "The run from the left flank to the box was something else. Then, his simple feints to fool the keeper and the defenders before scoring were simply magnificent. Most players would be panicking to take the shot when they are that close to the goal. But what did Zachary do? He remained calm and composed and thought about fooling the defenders before scoring. Such composure at crucial moments of the game is the attribute that separates the best players from the mediocre players in the game."

Ole chuckled. "The other thing I noticed is that he seems to create chances out of nothing. You know! When he received the ball close to the left flank during the 93rd minute, I only froze a bit, thinking along the lines of oh, well, there's a 5% chance he can score. Then he accelerated to his maximum speed, and his chances increased to 50% in a few seconds. He approaches the keeper and circumvents him, and then his scoring-probability increases only to 80% — simply because of the two defenders still blocking his way. But with two more feints, he sends the defenders packing, and he has an open goal in front of him. His chances are already 100% by then. He buries the ball in the back of the net."

"If other players had been in Zachary's position," Ole continued, "They wouldn't have had the courage and boldness to make the run in the first place. They would have played it safe and waited for their teammates to catch up since their chances of making a successful run from the flanks to goal were minimal. And they would definitely not have scored the goal."

"Let me correct you there, Ole," Juninho said. "There are a few other players who would have made the run. Messi is one. Cristiano Ronaldo, Ronaldo Nazário de Lima, and Ronaldinho would also have made the same decision. Then, there's Maradona, Ryan Giggs, Romario, etcetera. The list goes on."

Ole chuckled. "Yes, you're right," he said. "Those players would have chosen to run with the ball. But comparing Zachary to those greats shows how great he is, even when he's just 19 years. And I'm sure that many big clubs will be eager to snatch him from Rosenborg during the upcoming transfer window."

"Zachary's next club is a big talking point these days," Emilia said. "A few weeks ago, there were rumors of Juventus already initiating a move on him. But, I'm guessing that the Italian giants won't be the only ones looking forward to acquiring his services. Many other big clubs should start keeping an eye on him, especially after his performance today."

"Definitely," Ole agreed. "The big spenders like Real Madrid, Manchester United, Manchester City, and Chelsea would want to buy him. Even Barcelona would welcome him to Camp Nou by offering him a lucrative salary. But from what I heard, Zachary still has two more years on his contract with Rosenborg. So, all those wishing to acquire his services will have to cough out some good money."

Emilia smiled. "Where do you wish to see him next season?"

"Manchester United," Ole was quick to answer.

"I would prefer to see him in a Lyon shirt," Juninho said. "But I know that that isn't going to happen, especially after our fans booed him throughout the entire match. I guess seeing him in a Juventus shirt is my next best option. I want to see him partner-up with Pirlo, Vidal, and Pogba in Turin. They would do great things together."

"Let's first put speculations of Zachary's future to the side," Emilia said. "Rosenborg's overwhelming win has put the Norwegian giants in a seemingly invincible position during this quarter-final. But do you think there's a chance for Lyon to make a comeback at Lerkendal next week? Can Lyon overcome a deficit of four goals to qualify for the semi-finals of the Europa League?"

"There's no chance," Ole replied, shaking his head. "Rosenborg is a team that is clearly on form. They'll be playing at Lerkendal in front of their home fans. They'll also be having Zachary, their playmaker, on the pitch. Can Lyon make a comeback with all those factors superimposing together? I don't think so. Many people like to say that football is unpredictable right up to the last minute. But for me, I believe that the result of this quarter-final is already decided."

Emilia nodded and turned to the Brazilian Maestro. "What about you, Juninho? What do you think?"

Juninho sighed and shook his head. "If Zachary doesn't play the second leg," he said, "Lyon might have a chance. But we all know that that isn't going to happen. Coach Johansen might even rest Zachary during the weekend and reserve him for the second leg clash. And with Zachary on the pitch, Lyon's chances are very slim."

Chapter 359 Domestic League Fixture against Aalesund FK

The Rosenborg players remained turtled up in the dressing room to avoid the fan violence, which had gone on longer than expected after the game. They continued singing, dancing, and chatting loudly to celebrate their victory during the first few minutes. But they all soon grew silent and started dozing off on the benches as the post-match fatigue finally caught up to them. After a few more minutes, snores and sounds of deep breathing resounded across the dressing room as most of the players slipped into a deep sleep.

The holdup then continued for roughly two more hours — and finally, when the clock hand was almost pointing to the 1:00 AM mark, the coaches got the go-ahead from stadium security to depart from the stadium.

"Guys!" Coach Johansen shouted while moving around and waking up the sleeping players. "It's time to go. Pick your things, and let's go back to the hotel."

The players awoke with a start, like soldiers who had just heard an assembly bugle call. They hurriedly donned their jackets and shoes before slinging their bags over their shoulders and following the coaches out of the dressing room.

They walked quickly through the tunnel, and soon, they marched out of the stadium, heading towards their team bus, parked only a few meters away. But it was then that they noticed that the situation around the stadium wasn't right.

"What the hell happened here when we were in the dressing room?" Zachary exclaimed after noticing the anti-riot police surrounding the whole stadium entrance. He couldn't help but narrow his eyes slightly to block out the blinding red and blue police siren lights atop the armored vehicles.

"Seems like the Lyon fans went ahead and battled the police after the game," Eric Bailly replied, also glancing around. "By the look of things, it should have been quite a battle."

"This is craziness," Zachary mumbled as his eyes darted all over the place. He'd already noted that the French law enforcers encircling the stadium entrance and Rosenberg's team bus were armed with rifles, batons, and shields, seemingly as if they were guarding against a terrifying enemy. They even appeared to grow more alert when the Rosenberg players stepped out of the stadium.

"Guys!" Coach Johansen yelled from the front of the Rosenberg procession. "Don't drag your feet. Walk fast and enter the bus. We don't want to spend more time here than necessary." He even clapped his hands loudly as if to emphasize his point.

After hearing the coach's voice, Zachary and his teammates didn't continue gaping at the cops and armored vehicles surrounding the area. They hurried their steps and quickly entered the team bus before settling in their seats.

Without further ado, the bus took off, and before long, it was already traversing the wide streets of Lyon, heading to their hotel. Their journey was without any issues as a convoy of armored vehicles and police motorbikes escorted them all the way to their destination.

Before the clock hand pointed to the 2:00 AM mark, they alighted the bus before making their way into the hotel. They were finally ready to end the night, which had been both stressful and filled with the joy of their victory.

Zachary paused a bit at the hotel entrance and looked back. He was again startled when he noticed that the anti-riot police and the convoy of armored vehicles were taking strategic positions around the hotel. It seemed that they were planning to guard the hotel through the night. The notion made him wonder whether the police had gotten information that the Lyon fans were actually planning to assault the Rosenborg players.

Football was supposed to be a sport that brought fun and joy to people all around the globe. So, the sheer image of supporters of one football club assaulting players of an opposing team surprised and unnerved him greatly. It made him wonder whether he should start employing a bodyguard when he traveled through the cities of the teams his team had defeated.

"Zachary!" Coach Johansen called out from behind him. "Don't stand there, staring at the police. Just head to your room and let your body rest. We'll be returning to Trondheim on an 8:00 AM flight tomorrow morning. That gives you only about five hours of sleep."

"I'll head to my room now," Zachary said after turning away from the entrance. "Good night to you, coach."

"Good night, Zachary," the coach replied with a smile. "Make sure that you rest well, as we'll be recommencing serious training the day after tomorrow."

"Don't worry. I'll be ready." Zachary replied before alighting up the stairs and heading to his room. The match against Lyon had worn him out considerably. So, he was looking forward to diving into his bed and sinking into slumberland immediately.

As planned, the Rosenborg players returned to Trondheim the following morning. They only rested for a single day to recover from the post-match fatigue before resuming intensive training.

They had a tight schedule over the following seven days. First, they had to face off against Aalesund FK three days later at an away ground in their second fixture of that season's Tippeligaen. Then, four days after that, they would welcome Lyon to Lerkendal for the second leg clash of the Europa League quarter-finals. So, they couldn't relax if they wished to achieve desirable results from the two games.

Since they were well aware of what was at stake, all the players didn't complain when the coaches requested that they invest more time and effort into training. They performed all required drills with their hearts, especially since they wished to continue winning. Their relentlessness caused the atmosphere around the team to become more energetic, and the two days flashed by quickly. Eventually, Sunday morning arrived, and the players who had made the squad traveled to Aalesund to play their second domestic fixture of the season.

For that game, Coach Johansen once again rested all his star players. He benched Takumi Minamino, Eric Bailly, Yerry Mina, Thomas Partey, Nicki Nielsen, and Mikael Dorsin. As for Zachary, he wasn't even on the list of the substitutes that traveled to Aalesund. The coach ordered his playmaker to watch the match on-screen instead of traveling with the team and tiring himself out.

But even without the star players, the Rosenborg reserves still put up a commanding performance. They relied on a 4-5-1 formation to play a defensive game that rendered all the tactics of Aalesund useless. Due to their compact shape, they denied the opponents from breaking through their midfield and creating chances on goal. As a result, the score remained 0:0 as the players headed into the tunnel for half-time.

During the second half, the Troll Kids played a bit more aggressively. They sent more numbers forward and used high-pressing tactics to ensure that Aalesund could no longer dominate possession. Soon, they dictated the tempo and started creating more chances on goal. Eventually, their efforts paid off, and a goal-scoring opportunity arose during the 80th minute.

Mike Jensen, the Rosenborg defensive midfielder for the day, intercepted a lofted pass from an Aalesund defender. He brought the ball down with an outstretched boot before escaping his marker with a few skillful touches. When the angle opened up, he unleashed a long pass towards the right flank to find Riku Riski.

Riku Riski, Rosenborg's right-winger for the day, brought the ball under control with his chest. He then whirled around and fed it past the Aalesund left-back as his speed exploded. He soon crossed into the

final third and unleashed a lofted cross to find John Chibuike, the Rosenborg center-forward, within the box.

John Chibuike immediately escaped the harassment of his marker before leaping up to meet the descending ball. He timed his run well to plant a header towards the goal from around the edge of the penalty box. And without any surprise, the ball flashed past the keeper's outstretched hands before nestling itself into the back of the net.

Aalesund FK 0 : Rosenborg BK 1

Coach Johansen nodded and smiled as he watched his players celebrating the goal. A few minutes earlier, he'd just been about to sub on Nicki Nielsen and Takumi Minamino so that they could search for the winner.

But since his on-field players had already gotten the goal, he saw no need to go ahead with the substitution. He would only employ defensive tactics to manage the endgame and go home with three points at the end of the day.

"Guys!" He started yelling at his players. "We'll all play defensively for the rest of the game. So, I want nine men behind the ball for the remaining minutes. Only John Chibuike can stay on striking..."

The coach paced the entire length of the touchline as he hollered out instructions. And to his relief, his players adapted quickly and soon started utilizing ultra-defensive tactics.

They all settled in defense and prevented team Aalesund from creating more chances at goal. Thanks to their tactical discipline, the score remained 1:0 in favor of Rosenborg until the final whistle sounded.

Chapter 360 Intimacy and Bliss

Zachary breathed a sigh of relief after the game between Rosenborg and Aalesund ended. He'd only managed to watch the match on-screen in the living room of his apartment in Trondheim. But he could

still envision the excitement that his teammates were feeling just by looking at their expressions as they marched out of the pitch.

"Is the game over?" Camilla's voice emerged from the bedroom. She'd begun spending most of her weekends at Zachary's apartment over the past month. That Sunday evening was no exception.

"The game has just ended," Zachary replied, raising his voice slightly. "The presenters and pundits are now conducting a boring post-match analysis."

"Who won?" Camilla asked once again.

"Do you have to ask?" Zachary said while aiming the remote at the television to switch to another channel. "Of course, it's Rosenborg that triumphed against Aalesund. No team in Norway can defeat us at this moment if we play at half our best."

There was no response from the bedroom for a few seconds, causing Zachary to crease his brows, wondering why she had fallen silent. But the next second, he smiled when he saw her step out of the bedroom and into the living room.

One glance at her, and Zachary could immediately tell that she'd just taken a shower. Her brown hair, tied loosely in a ponytail, seemed a bit moist while no traces of make-up could be seen on her pretty face. But all the same, she looked as gorgeous and titillating as ever, especially in her tight-fitting shorts that accentuated her long legs and shapely thighs.

A soft smile outlined her face as she strode into the living room. She halted her steps right in front of Zachary, seemingly to divert his attention from the screen. Then, her emerald-green eyes crinkled at the corners as she asked, "Who was the person that previously mentioned that he wasn't sure about his team's chances of winning the game?"

Zachary smiled sheepishly as his eyes darted across the entire length of her lithe figure. He could feel a fire burning inside him as the aroma from her shampoo assaulted his senses.

"That was my ego speaking," he said. "I was also in anguish, especially after the coach left me out of the squad traveling to Aalesund. So, you shouldn't take my words at the time seriously."

"Is that so?" Camilla smiled and sat on his lap. Then, she leaned forward, causing her alluring breath to tickle at his ear. "I feel that you're a naughty boy. And naughty boys deserve to be punished for their naughty deeds. Don't you think so?"

"I accept my wrongdoings," Zachary said, playing along. He breathed in deeply, burying his head in her hair. "How do you plan to punish me, madam?"

"That's simple!" A gorgeous smile lit up Camilla's face as she leaned back to lock eyes with Zachary. Then, without saying anything else, she cupped his face and leaned forward to kiss him aggressively on the lips. "That's your punishment." She said, smiling mischievously and leaning back.

"Madam!" Zachary whispered. "I like this sort of punishment. Can we continue?"

Without waiting for her reply, he responded to her teasing in kind. He locked her in a firm embrace, and the two of them made out for minutes on the couch, causing the fires of passion within them to burn brighter and brighter with an untamed vehemence.

They could no longer hold themselves back after a short while, and clothes started dropping to the floor as they sunk deeper and deeper into exploring their primal desires. And finally, they joined together in the most rudimentary and age-old ritual of expressing their feelings for one another.

Moans and grunts, accompanied by heavy breathing sounds, soon resounded across the room as a testament to their love-making session. They changed positions and postures several times as the intensity of their actions increased steadily and quickly, causing them to forget everything else in the world. Eventually, they seemed to transcend a critical pleasure point and immediately hit a thunderous united zenith, which pushed them over the edge of sensual bliss.

"That was incredible. I love you, Zachary," Camilla whispered in-between gasps of breath as she collapsed in Zachary's arms. The little bit of sweat coating her tanned skin made it glisten under the artificial lighting in the living room.

"I love you too, Camilla," Zachary replied, patting her back and hugging her tighter. "You were really aggressive and intense today. But I'm not complaining."

Camilla let out a soft chuckle as she traced circles on his chest. She remained silent for a few more seconds before saying, "Zachary! Can I ask you something?"

"You don't have to ask for permission," Zachary replied, tracing his hands back and forth along her curvaceous smooth waistline. "Feel free to ask me anything."

Camilla supported herself up from Zachary's chest with her arms before locking gazes with him. "Who's *éleanor Bohen*?" She asked.

"*éleanor Bohen*!?" Zachary mumbled, narrowing his eyes. He was confused. "Is the name supposed to mean anything to me?"

"You tell me," Camilla said with a sigh. "Yesterday, when I was doing the laundry, I happened to chance upon a neatly-designed card in the name of an *éleanor Bohen*. It was in the pocket of one of your tracksuits."

Zachary's mind blanked out for a moment. Then, he sighed as he recalled the incident in Lyon when the pretty blonde reporter stealthily pushed a business card into his pocket. He had decided to throw away the card after getting out of the public's eye but kept on forgetting afterward.

"So, who's this *éleanor Bohen*?" Camilla queried in a soft voice.

Zachary sighed again before telling her the story of the reporter in Lyon. He described the entire incident vividly, without leaving out too many details. But he didn't mention that the lady reporter was beautiful or that he found her pleasing to the eyes after seeing her in a Rosenberg jersey.

Camilla chuckled after hearing his story. "Let me get this straight," she said, her eyes flickering with mischievousness. "You're moving through the airport with your teammates. Suddenly, reporters and fans interrupt you. And then, at the end of it all, a pretty lady reporter shoves a business card into your pocket without your knowledge. She then whispers in your ear, encouraging you to call her, before walking away. Then, you forget about her business card, and it remains in your pocket. Is that the whole story?"

"That's it," Zachary replied, nodding.

Camilla beamed, kissing him lightly on the cheek. "So, tell me," she said after a moment. "Did you at any one moment think about calling her?" She asked.

"Of course not," Zachary was quick to reply. "How can I get tempted by an average-looking blonde when I'm dating the most beautiful and sexiest girl in the world? The question is a no-brainer."

"Tee hee," Camilla giggled before resting her head on Zachary's chest again. "You're beginning to have a way with words. But I like it. By the way, have you talked to your grandma today? Is she doing okay?"

"The doctors tell me that she's improving very fast," Zachary replied. "If the next few tests are satisfactory, the doctors will discharge her from the hospital in about three weeks."

"That's great news!" Camilla said. "I'm happy for you, and of course, I'm also happy for her."

"Thanks," Zachary said, patting her back lightly. "Let's get up and take a shower. We need to have dinner and prepare for tomorrow. Don't forget that tomorrow is a Monday. You have to go to work early, and I have to attend a meeting and then go for training afterward."

Camilla groaned, not moving a single inch. "Stop being anxious. I'm sure that your coach will allow you a day off tomorrow since Rosenborg has just played a game today evening. So, relax, and let's stay like this for a few more minutes."

"Your wish is my command, my lady," Zachary said, smiling wryly. He also felt guilty for not spending enough time with Camilla over the past few months. So, he wasn't about to let her down by denying her a few more minutes of cuddling.

The following day, Zachary woke up early as usual. He enjoyed a tasty home-cooked breakfast prepared by Camilla before going through his customary morning yoga routine. After that, he took a shower with

Camilla, and the two of them shared some moments of early morning intimacy until they were slightly out of breath.

Thirty minutes later, they exited the shower, feeling blissful and relaxed, before starting their preparations for the hectic Monday schedule.

Zachary was as swift as ever while dressing up. He quickly pulled on his tracksuit and pushed his feet into his sneakers before packing his gym bag. In only a couple of minutes, he was done with his preparations. So, he settled into one of the sofas in the living room before patiently waiting for Camilla to get ready.

Camilla was a bit slower. She first ironed her suit a couple of times before utilizing about twenty minutes to dress up. Applying her make-up took even longer, and she only ended her preparations when the clock hand was almost pointing to the eight o'clock mark.

Zachary smiled and stood up from the sofa after seeing her exiting the bedroom. "You look smart," he said. "That suit really looks good on you."

"Thank you," she said, beaming. "You also... I don't know what to say as I don't wish to lie to you very early in the morning." She shook her head before slipping her feet into her high heels by the door.

"Is there a problem?" Zachary asked, narrowing his eyes. "I thought we were having a good time."

"Of course, we are," she replied. "But, I'm just wondering why you're in your tracksuit again. Aren't you going for a meeting with your agent and the investment consultant? Why are you dressed in your training gear?"

"That's because I want to go to the gym right after the meeting," Zachary replied. "Moreover, these Nike tracksuits are very comfortable and multipurpose. I don't see why I shouldn't wear them to a meeting, especially since I'm a pro-athlete."

"A green tracksuit over dark-brown sneakers to a meeting!" Camilla raised a brow. "I'm starting to doubt whether Nike endorsing you was really a good deal on your end. I haven't seen you wear anything else ever since they started providing you with their tracksuits at no cost."

Zachary chuckled. "Why are we talking about my tracksuits at this point?" He said, shaking his head. "We need to hurry! Otherwise, you'll be late for work, and I might be late for my meeting."

Camila shook her head and picked up her handbag from a nearby table. "We can go now," she said. "But we're not done discussing those tracksuits of yours. If you need to save money, I can link you up with a few men's clothing brands that can always give you free and presentable clothes and shoes. They would be happy to let you wear their brands since you're a rising football star. They might even pay you to model those brands."

"Let's talk about this some other time," Zachary said, opening the door out of the apartment. "But, for now, we need to get going, or we'll both be late."

"Okay, I understand." Camilla smiled and drew him in for a fervent kiss. She then hugged him for a few seconds before marching out of the door.

Zachary shook his head and smiled before locking the door and following after her. Before long, they were already descending the stairs and heading out of the building.