

Greatest 371

Chapter 371 Eve of the Europa League Semi-Final

After Rosenborg's domestic game against FK Bodø/Glimt, Zachary and his teammates started preparing for the Europa League semi-final match against Sport Lisboa e Benfica. They trained arduously over the next few days with the intent to improve their match fitness and to also master the tactics for the game. The team training covered all the essential areas of any typical football match, including physical conditioning, passing, off-ball movements, plus zonal and man-marking strategies.

Coach Johansen even went further and compelled the players to practice their penalty-taking techniques on a daily basis. He would summon them and have them take dozens of penalties against the Rosenborg keepers during the evenings. He would then end the day's training by giving lectures about theories covering effective shooting techniques.

The Rosenborg schedule became packed, and all the players, including Zachary, became busier. The days flashed by quickly, and eventually, Wednesday morning arrived. The players, who had made Coach Johansen's squad, boarded a KLM Airlines flight from Trondheim to Lisbon.

The plane had only a single stopover in Amsterdam, and six hours later, at around noon, it touched down on the runway of the Humberto Delgado Airport. The Rosenborg players and staff avoided all the fanfare within the airport's hallways and collected their luggage. Before long, they exited the airport and boarded the team bus to their hotel.

Since their hotel was close to the airport, the traveling time on the team bus was brief. In around 15 minutes, the driver rounded a corner and pulled up in front of the grand Lisbon Marriott Hotel.

The players and staff alighted from the bus and picked up their luggage before stepping into the hotel. Under the guidance of a group of dedicated hotel staff, they soon checked into their hotel rooms. After unpacking and settling in, they headed to the hotel's restaurant for lunch.

"The meal is surprisingly good," Mikael Dorsin said after tasting his braised pork chops. He was at the same table with Zachary, Nicki, Eric Bailly, Thomas Partey, and Kasongo. "I should visit Lisbon more often to enjoy this delicious food." He smiled as he swallowed down another piece of meat.

Nicki Nielsen glanced up from his plate filled with tofu lettuce wraps. "Mikael!" he said. "Be careful not to overeat. We don't want you to underperform tomorrow evening."

"Says the man enjoying a vegetarian meal before the game," Mikael countered. "Aren't you worried that you'll lack stamina tomorrow evening?"

"Guys!" Zachary interrupted before Nicki could reply. "Do you know the program for the afternoon?"

Mikael nodded and said, "The coach has already informed me that we won't have any training today. A fraction of us will instead utilize the time to survey the stadium. On the other hand, you and Coach Johansen will stay at the hotel to attend the pre-match press conference."

"I have to attend the press conference!?" Zachary narrowed his eyes as he glanced at the assistant captain. "Coach Johansen can manage by himself. Why do I have to go?"

Mikael sighed and placed his table knife and fork down. "Over the past few days, there have been rumors that you're very ill. These rumors have caused our fans to become agitated as the Europa League semis draw near. So, I'm guessing that the coach wants you to be at the press conference so that you can clear up those rumors."

"I see," Zachary said as he sunk his table knife and fork into his steak. He diced a piece and placed it in his mouth to appreciate the taste and rich flavors of the meat before swallowing it down.

Ever since turning pro, Zachary had always endeavored to eat well before any game. That time was no different as he had a tray filled with various types of food before him. Vitamin-rich vegetables, carbohydrate-rich foods like bread, and protein-rich meat dishes were all part of his diet. He was going the extra mile to ensure that he would have enough energy stored for tomorrow's game.

As planned, the Rosenborg delegation split into two groups after lunch. The larger batch, comprising most players and staff, headed to the Estádio da Luz to survey and familiarize themselves with the stadium venue for their game against Benfica the following day. On the other hand, the small cluster, comprising just Zachary and Coach Johansen, remained at the hotel to undertake the pre-match press conference duties.

"Welcome to Lisbon, team Rosenborg," a female journalist said after Zachary and Coach Johansen settled down in a relatively large conference room at the hotel. "My first question is to Coach Johansen. Can you tell us about the team's current status? Are all the players in good health?"

Coach Johansen smiled at the reporter. "Except for Tobias, who received an injury a few weeks back, all the other players on the team are in great shape. Their match fitness is exceptional, and they're ready to give their all in tomorrow's game."

"What is your take on Benfica?" The same reporter asked after jostling down a few notes in her notebook. "Do you think you can defeat Benfica and qualify for this year's Europa League finals?"

"Benfica is a great team with great history, especially in Portugal," Coach Johansen said. "The Benfica players are also in great shape as they have already defeated Tottenham and AZ Alkmaar on their way to the Europa League semi-finals. However, I still believe that we can overcome them. Our results during this Europa League campaign speak for themselves. We've already defeated strong teams like Juventus, Fiorentina, and Lyon. We're ready to do the same during the semi-finals, and we'll only be playing for a win and nothing else."

"I have a question for Zachary Bemba," another reporter chimed in. "Zachary! There have been rumors that you have been seriously ill over the previous two weeks. Many Rosenborg fans were even worried that you might miss today's game due to illness. Are these rumors correct?"

Zachary smiled. "As you can all see," he said, "I'm in good health and here in Lisbon to play the match against Benfica. I was indeed suffering from a common cold some days back. But I recovered and returned to training on time. I'm now in good health and ready to perform as usual during tomorrow's game."

The same reporter smiled. "Another query," he said. "I have been looking at your stats for this Europa League campaign, and they are just incredible. You've already surpassed Radamel Falcao's 2010-11 goal-scoring record of seventeen goals by netting nineteen goals for Rosenborg in the Europa League this season. How do you feel about breaking this record as you head into tomorrow's semi-final? Do you think breaking the record will motivate you to perform better?"

Zachary smiled. "First of all, I would like to clarify that I previously didn't know that the record number of goals ever scored in a single Europa League season was seventeen before this year. So, I was definitely not playing with the intent to break the record. Of course, I feel happy to break records. But that isn't

my focus during any match. Since football is a game of eleven, my only aim will always be to play in a way that can help my team achieve victory."

Jorge Jesus, the head coach of Benfica, yearned to win a double that season. He was already five points ahead of the second-placed Sporting CP and only needed three more to win the domestic league. So, if Benfica could win the Europa League, the coach would achieve his wish and end the season on a high note. But before thinking about the final or the trophy, he had to find a way to defeat the dark horses - Rosenborg first. Otherwise, all his wishes would remain pipe dreams.

Coach Jorge Jesus met up with his players in the tactics room that evening. As usual, he spent time analyzing the opponents' weaknesses for the first half an hour before diving into the actual tactics of the game.

"By now, you should all be aware that Rosenborg is a team that relies on counterattacking tactics to score goals in the Europa League." He spoke in Portuguese as he began pacing around the room. "The Rosenborg players spend most of the time defending, and when you relax, even a bit, they hit you on the counter. So, to deal with them, we'll have to find ways to render those counters useless. And the only way to do that is by imitating them and playing a defensive game while also containing Zachary Bemba, their playmaker."

"I repeat," the coach continued, "the most crucial task for us is to mark Zachary and prevent him from scoring during the match. As long as we guard against Zachary, all Rosenborg's counterattacking strategies will become useless since the clinical abilities of their other players are just subpar. I believe that after taking him out of the equation, Rosenborg will become just another team from the lower tier leagues of Europe. We'll then defeat them by relying on our tactics and superior skills."

"But we all need to know that the million-dollar question that'll enable us to win this game is how to contain Zachary? We all know that we need to stop him. But the tricky part is: can we actually stop him? I'm pretty sure that Lyon wanted to prevent him from scoring. But in the end, he scored six goals against them. The same applies to previous teams like Juventus and Fiorentina. They all knew how to stop Rosenborg but failed due to Zachary's presence on the pitch."

"So, guys," he continued in Portuguese, "What can we do differently to ensure that the same thing that happened to Lyon, Juventus, and Fiorentina doesn't happen to us? The answer is simple. We should not

let Zachary receive the ball in the first place. We need to utilize zonal marking to limit his movements and time on the ball. We also need to harass him constantly to stop him from settling down in midfield."

"André, Rúben, and Pérez: this task will fall upon you, our three central midfielders. You only need to form defensive triangles around him throughout the entire game so that we discourage his teammates from passing to him. And if they do pass to him, we need to close him down fast and stop him long before he reaches the box. I don't care what you three have to do. You can even pull his shirt or foul him. But I don't want to see him making runs into our box. Is that clear?" He focused his scorching gaze on the three midfielders.

"We understand, coach," the three replied almost in chorus.

"Excellent," Coach Jorge Jesus said. He was confident that his team was ready to face off against the dark horses. And if luck was on his side, he should be able to frustrate them defensively in the same way they had frustrated their opponents during the previous stages of the Europa League. So, the coach only assigned a few more roles to the rest of his players before ending the tactical meeting about thirty minutes later.

Chapter 372 A Tricky Game

Thursday, April 24, 2014.

Estádio da Luz, SL Benfica's Home Ground, Lisbon, Portugal.

Time: 9:00 PM.

The cheers hit a crescendo as players of both teams marched onto the pitch, ready to commence their long-awaited Europa League semi-final battle. The Benfica players were in their red and white home colors, while the Rosenborg squad had donned their all-black away jersey. They all looked dapper as they lined up in front of the tunnel before going through the customary handshake ceremony.

The proceedings moved forward quite fast, and in only a few minutes, the players started taking up their positions on the pitch. And when the clock hand was pointing to the 9:05 PM mark, the referee had

already conducted the coin toss. He positioned himself close to the center circle and glanced at his watch as a rare wave of silence swept through the stands of the Estádio da Luz.

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The next moment, the kick-off whistle echoed, and the fans became wild and frantic as they chanted the names of their respective teams at the top of their lungs. Soon, the voices of the more than 55,000 people in the stands of the Estádio da Luz blended into a chaotic thunderous symphony that shook the entire stadium. Over the next few seconds, it was as if the stadium was experiencing a mild earthquake due to the sheer magnitude of the noise.

On the pitch: the game was already underway, and it was Benfica, the home side, with the ball. The players in red and white had arrayed themselves into a 4-2-3-1 formation that revealed their intent to defend. They utilized a tedious style of play, whereby the defenders and defensive midfielders passed the ball unhurriedly in the backfield, from one end of the pitch to the other, without advancing to attack. It was as if they were daring the Rosenborg players to step forward into their defensive third to win the ball from them if they could.

The Rosenborg players seemed to grow impatient after not seeing much of the ball during the first ten minutes. They soon broke out of their ultra-defensive 4-5-1 shape and streamed forward with the intent to high-press and quickly win the ball from the 'unmotivated' Benfica players.

But just as the Rosenborg players were beginning to high-press, a swift change occurred on the pitch. Ezequiel Garay, the Benfica center-back who had the ball at the moment, unleashed a superb long pass to the other end of the pitch before any opponents could close him down. His vision was on point, and he managed to pick out Miralem Sulejmani, Benfica's left-winger.

Miralem Sulejmani controlled the ball close to the touchline on the left flank. He then pivoted around to escape the harassment of Karl Toko Ekambi before exploding with speed towards the other side of the pitch. Before any other opponent could close him down, he unleashed a curling cross towards the edge of the box from around the border of the final third.

Óscar Cardozo, the Benfica center forward, leaped high to meet the incoming cross from around the arc of the eighteen-yard box. He shrugged off Tore Reginiussen in a battle of aerial superiority and perfectly connected with the cross from his teammate. He chested the ball to the ground and then squared a pass to Rodrigo Moreno Machado, Benfica's right-winger.

Rodrigo controlled the ball mid-sprint at the right edge of the box. Without losing composure, he dashed into Rosenberg's box like the wind before expertly looping the ball over the keeper to score Benfica's first goal during the 12th minute.

"Oh, my goodness me!" The commentator's voice reverberated across the stadium as Rodrigo sprinted towards the corner flag to celebrate. "Benfica has caught Rosenberg napping to score the first goal in the 12th minute. All the Rosenberg players, including their playmaker - Zachary Bemba, couldn't stop the goal due to the swift change of play from defense to attack. Oh my, my! The fairy tale of the underdogs in the Europa League might end today night."

"Damn," Coach Johansen cursed as he watched the Benfica players celebrating the goal. The goal had really shocked and shaken him to the core as it had come out of the blue. He was not in the best of moods since his team was already a goal down even before his players could get used to the away atmosphere in Lisbon and settle down in the game. The situation was really dire.

"How do we get back into the game?"

Coach Johansen's thoughts were all over the place. He had a feeling that the game that evening would be a tricky one, especially if he didn't come up with a way to boost the morale of his players. He even feared that his team might concede more goals before halftime if his players remained panicky and unsettled on the pitch. So, he had to take action immediately to prevent the game situation from turning much worse.

"Guys!" He shouted at the top of his voice as he walked towards the touchline. "Don't let the goal bring you down. We still have more than 85 minutes of game time remaining. As long as we utilize the time well and stick to our game plan, we'll manage to score before the final whistle. So, please don't lose your confidence and morale."

"Zachary!" Coach Johansen continued. "Their three central midfielders have already created a defensive zone around you in midfield. You have to start making runs into or through the wings to escape their net. Otherwise, your teammates won't be able to evade their blockade and pass to you. Nicki! We need more energy from you on the striking line. Try to apply more pressure on those center backs and prevent them from making easy passes in the backfield..."

The coach continued hollering out instructions at the pace of a machine gun for roughly a minute. His objective was to ensure that his team regained both morale and confidence before the restart of the game.

The game restarted after the goal celebrations, and team Benfica played more defensively, without launching any attack during the following ten minutes. They seemed satisfied with the one goal and exerted more effort to solidify their ultra-defensive tactics. They obviously wanted to snuff out even the remotest of possibilities of Rosenborg scoring a goal.

"This match is tricky," Zachary thought as he analyzed Benfica's strategy after the ball had moved out of play for a throw-in. "We might not be able to use counterattacking football in this game since the opponents are turtling up in defense. Truly problematic!"

Zachary's frown deepened. Before the game, he'd learned from the coaches that Benfica was a team that often utilized high-intensity attacking football to dominate their opponents. The Portuguese side usually employed a 4-1-3-2 formation to overwhelm the opposing teams with a never-ending stream of attacks.

But contrary to Zachary's and everyone else's expectations, the Portuguese giants had totally altered their football philosophy to 'park the bus' with a defensive 4-2-3-1 formation. Their ultra-defensive gameplan had caught Rosenborg off guard and rendered Coach Johansen's counterattacking tactics useless. As a result, Rosenborg had to revise its game strategy since there wasn't a way to counterattack a team that only focused on defending and not conceding a goal.

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The referee blew the whistle and motioned for team Benfica to take their throw-in. Maximiliano Pereira, the right-back, immediately raced forward before planting his feet on the touchline and throwing the ball towards Enzo Pérez, one of Benfica's two defensive midfielders.

Enzo Pérez escaped from Takumi Minamino, his marker, and raced forward to meet the ball close to the center circle. He brought it under control before turning around and threading a pass to Rúben Amorim, his counterpart in defensive midfield.

Zachary immediately rushed forward like a predator on the hunt on seeing Rúben Amorim about to control the ball. He closed in on the defensive midfielder with all the speed he could muster before sliding in to tackle the ball. He was already looking forward to winning possession back for Rosenborg.

Chapter 373 Special Care for Zachary The next moment, Zachary's heart throbbed with excitement as he felt his boot connect with the ball before sweeping it away from the defensive midfielder's feet. Without bothering to look at the fallen opponent, he picked himself up from the ground and pounced toward the ball, intending to launch an attack immediately.

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But just then, the referee blew the whistle for a foul, causing Zachary to halt his actions. His eyes narrowed as he turned around to face the approaching referee. "I got the ball first," he said, spreading out his arms. "How can you judge that as a foul?"

"You're mistaken," the Turkish referee countered. "You got the leg instead of the ball. But since this is your first offense, I'll let you off with just a verbal warning. However, if you commit any other dangerous fouls, I'll be forced to show you a card. Be careful from now on."

"Are you for real?" Zachary was exasperated. "Just look at him." He pointed at Rúben Amorim, who had already stopped acting and picked himself from the ground. "Does the player seem like someone who has just endured a dangerous foul?"

"Enough," the referee said. "Stop complaining. My decision is final. You fouled an opponent, and I have awarded the opposing team a free-kick. Step away and let the opponents take their set-piece. If not, I'll show you a yellow card right now."

"Zachary," Mikael called out after rushing to the scene. "Ignore everything and cool down, man. A single free kick won't change anything. Relax and play as usual. You'll soon get a chance to pay them back."

"Yes, a single set-piece won't change anything," Nicki Nielsen echoed, pulling him away from the referee. "Don't risk a yellow card for nothing."

Zachary nodded and took a deep breath to calm himself down. The built-up frustration brought about by his team conceding a goal early in the first half had almost caused him to lose his temper. But after his teammates reminded him about what was important, he immediately recovered his calm state of mind and continued walking away from the scene of the free kick.

But just as he was about to take up a defensive position in preparation to guard against the set-piece, Rúben approached him with a smile. "Zachary," the defensive midfielder said in a soft voice. "I just wanted to let you know that you were right complaining to the referee. You obviously got the ball first, but I dived and won the free-kick. I'm really sorry about the injustice."

Zachary raised a brow as he met the defensive midfielder's gaze. "What's your purpose in telling me this?" He also asked in English. "Do you expect your statement to annoy me? Do you expect me to punch you and incur the referee's wrath after telling me this?"

A lopsided grin outlined the midfielder's face. "As a player, I know that losing in football can be painful. You must be hurting on the inside since you guys are already one goal down. That's why I decided to apologize so that I can alleviate your pain slightly." The guy then nodded and stepped away from Zachary's position.

"Crazy idiot," Zachary mumbled as he watched the defensive midfielder scuttling away. His mood wasn't the least bit agitated by the simple mind games. He discarded the incident from his mind and returned his focus to the game.

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The referee blew the whistle a few seconds later and signaled for team Benfica to take their free-kick. Enzo Pérez, one of the three Benfica midfielders, immediately took the free-kick long and unleashed a lofted pass towards the area behind Rosenborg's defensive line.

Luisão, the Benfica center-back who was also the captain, broke out from the defensive line of players. He timed his run perfectly and headed the ball onwards—towards the left side of the box to find Óscar Cardozo, the Benfica center forward.

Óscar Cardozo brought the ball to the ground with an outstretched boot. He then expertly circumvented the approaching keeper with a few touches before burying the ball into the back of the net. He'd finally managed to double Benfica's lead in the 24th minute.

Zachary felt his heart sink into the abyss of desperation as he watched the Benfica players celebrating the goal. He couldn't comprehend how the opponents were already two goals ahead even though they had played sub-par football. They lacked creativity and individual brilliance, yet they were winning. The whole progress of the match was really baffling and depressing, as far as Zachary was concerned.

"Sorry, man," the familiar voice of Rúben Amorim made its way into his ears as he was still watching the celebrating players and brooding over conceding the goal. "I know it must be painful since we've scored again. But hang in there. Even if you lose, you can still feel proud as you have already helped your team reach the semi-finals of the Europa League. That's quite a big achievement for a small team from Norway."

Zachary whirled around and gave the defensive midfielder a deep look. He met his gaze for a few seconds before shaking his head and quietly walking away—towards the center circle. His team was already two goals down. So, he had no time to waste bickering with an opponent. He had to restart the game as soon as possible and pull out all the weapons in his arsenal if he wished to fight for the slim chance of bringing the proceedings on the pitch back to level terms.

Rúben Amorim glanced at Zachary's receding back and frowned. Before kick-off, the coach had given him the task of throwing the young playmaker off his game. So, he had been throwing out a few disguised verbal jabs, hoping to annoy the young playmaker. But all his efforts were futile as Zachary had chosen to ignore him.

"You're doing great work for the team," Luisão, the Benfica captain, said after approaching his position. A grin still outlined his face as he'd just finished celebrating the goal with the other Benfica players. "Zachary hasn't managed to threaten our goal during today's game. I'm guessing that he's off his game rhythm due to your handiwork."

"You're wrong about that," Rúben replied and started making his way towards the other end of the pitch. "I don't think I've made any progress with Zachary since he has been ignoring all my attempts to annoy him. He should still be as composed and as dangerous as ever. He merely hasn't gotten the

opportunity to create any chances. So, we need to continue harassing him. Otherwise, if he picks up his usual rhythm, we'll be in danger even if we're already two goals ahead."

Luisão narrowed his eyes, seemingly in contemplation, as he matched Rúben's steps towards Benfica's half. They walked quickly, especially since the referee had already notified all the players to hurry back to their positions for the restart.

"Continue trying your best to annoy him and break his rhythm every few minutes after the restart," Luisão finally said as they crossed the center-line and stepped into Benfica's half. "I'll also tell the rest of the guys in defense and midfield to remain wary of him. I believe that we'll be able to contain him if we work together as a team."

"Hopefully, we can contain him," Rúben said as he finally took up his position within Benfica's middle third. "Otherwise, if we allow him to score a single goal, his confidence will surge, and then the task of stopping him will become harder. So, make sure that all the guys understand their roles for the rest of the game."

"Don't worry," Luisão said. "I'm sure the rest of the guys know what to do since they'd had all watched Zachary's past match videos. I believe that they won't relax even if we're already two goals ahead. But to be safe, I'll continue reminding them about the task at hand throughout the entire game."

"That would be for the best." Rúben smiled, glancing around. "Better head to your position as the referee is about to restart the game. Don't let the opponents catch you off guard in defense."

"Don't worry," Luisão said, grinning. "I'm heading back now. And good luck to you." The center back didn't wait for a response but just turned around and jogged towards his starting position within Benfica's defensive third.

Rúben breathed in deeply and turned his gaze to the other side of the pitch. His eyes focused on Zachary as he thought about what he would have to do to contain the young midfielder. The other party seemed to feel his stare and glanced at him, and the two of them locked eyes for a moment.

"You won't score against us. You definitely won't score." Rúben silently mouthed the words at a slow pace to ensure that the other party understood what he meant.

But in response, Zachary smiled and shook his head before turning his gaze away. The young midfielder still seemed to be immune to his verbal jabs.

Rúben wasn't discouraged, though. He understood that he couldn't rush the process of throwing a talented playmaker off his game. He only needed to continue doing things to interrupt the guy's rhythm now and then, and he would be able to limit his performance during the game. And as long as the young playmaker didn't perform, Benfica would have a very high possibility of winning the two semi-final legs with their two-goal cushion.

Chapter 374 Crafty Tactics I *FWEEEEEEEE*

A few seconds later, the referee blew the whistle and signaled for the game to restart. Nicki Nielsen, Rosenborg's only center-forward, glanced around before kicking the ball back into his midfield.

Zachary received the ball just outside the center circle with a simple touch. He immediately turned around before passing it further back into his half—towards Thomas Partey, Rosenborg's holding midfielder.

Thomas Partey exhibited a sense of urgency as he connected with the pass. He took a single touch on the ball before kicking it to Mikael Dorsin, Rosenborg's left-back. The latter controlled it well before flicking it to Takumi Minamino, one of Rosenborg's midfielders, who had just run into space in the middle of the field.

Takumi altered his course slightly to connect with the incoming pass. But just as he was about to control the ball, two Benfica players closed him down quickly. They were Enzo Pérez and Miralem Sulejmani. The two of them were like two whirlwinds as they boxed in the young Japanese midfielder from two sides.

However, Takumi didn't lose his composure in the slightest. With the nimblest of touches, he looped the ball over one of the incoming opponents before chesting it to the ground. He glanced up once before unleashing a lofted pass towards the wing to find Zachary Bemba.

Zachary had just drifted out of the midfield to escape the harassment of his bodyguards. He leaped high and controlled the ball with his chest close to the touchline on the right flank. He immediately whirled around and accelerated towards Benfica's half like the wind.

Guilherme Siqueira, the Benfica left-back, soon stepped forward to intercept his run through the flank. The left-back angled his approach and body skillfully to force Zachary towards the sidelines.

However, Zachary remained composed as he kept his eyes on the approaching defender. And when the defender was only about two meters away, Zachary slowed down slightly before executing a couple of side steps followed by a body feint. The defender bought his dummy and stepped to the side.

"Chance!"

Zachary executed an elastico dribble and circumvented the defender from the opposite side. But just as he was about to increase his speed and continue his sprint, he realized that two more Benfica players had blocked his way.

They were Rúben Amorim and André Gomes, who were two of the three players that had been zone marking him ever since the start of the game.

"You're not going anywhere!" Rúben was as vocal as ever as he approached Zachary. "Just give up." The midfielder spread his arms like a basketball player on the defensive as he tried to block Zachary's path.

Zachary, of course, ignored the midfielder's words as all his focus was on how to beat the two opponents before him. He smiled and halted in his tracks before stepping over the ball with his left leg. One of the midfielders bought the dummy, but Zachary still didn't choose to break through the blockade. Instead, he continuously altered his center of gravity while executing a couple of more side steps.

His swift and elegant footwork soon dazzled and disoriented the two opponents. They could only fidget about as their bodies repeatedly shifted from side to side according to the cadence of his step overs. They were obviously having a hard time against him.

After a few more seconds, Rúben, one of the two opponents, seemed like he had had enough of Zachary's nonsense. He stepped forward and stretched out a boot to tackle the ball.

Zachary's smile widened as the midfielder's reaction was what he'd been anticipating. Without losing a moment, he executed an elastico dribble to circumvent the impatient Rúben from the right before whirling around and barely skipping past the tackle from the other opponent.

Zachary breathed a sigh of relief as he'd just managed to get himself out of a tight situation on the right flank. His heart started racing, and adrenaline flooded into his body. He lifted his leg, intending to continue his sprint towards Benfica's box. But just then, he felt a strong tug on his jersey, and he realized that one of the opponents was trying to foul him to stop him from advancing Rosenborg's attack.

"Damn!"

Zachary cursed inwardly without looking back. He continued trying to move forward, intending to shrug off the opponent's grip. But he soon realized that all his efforts were futile since the opponent was shameless enough not to release the jersey even after a few more seconds of tussling.

Zachary stopped his actions and turned around. He was totally incensed when he realized that Rúben Amorim was the opponent who had fouled him. He shoved the guy away and yelled, "What's your problem? Can't you play some sensible football without resorting to these petty tricks?"

"Aaahhh, Ref!"

Rúben cried out loud as he collapsed to the ground. He held on to his chest and squirmed about on the green while creasing his brows. It was as if he was experiencing immense pain. His acting was obviously at the Hollywood level.

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The referee blew the whistle as he rushed to the scene. He narrowed his eyes as he checked on Rúben, the midfielder still wriggling about on the ground. The next moment, the referee shook his head and smiled as he took out his cards. He ignored Rúben and stepped toward Zachary before showing him a yellow card.

"What did I do that is deserving of a yellow card?" Zachary complained as a bitter smile outlined his face. "The guy is the one who pulled my jersey and almost tore it from my body. And now, he's just pretending by rolling around on the ground."

"I know," the referee said. "But let's focus on you first. You conducted yourself in an unsportsmanlike manner by pushing your opponent away. That kind of behavior is deserving of a yellow card. If you had remained composed and resisted the urge to shove him away, I would have awarded you a free-kick and penalized him alone. But due to your impulsiveness, you've also received a yellow card."

The referee didn't speak any more needless words. He turned around and waited for Rúben to stand up before showing him a yellow card. He then awarded Rosenborg a free kick for the foul on Zachary.

Zachary shook his head and let loose a bitter sigh as the referee stepped away. He was not in the best of moods since he'd just suffered another injustice for the night. But due to his experience as a professional player, he managed to calm down after taking a few deep breaths.

Chapter 375 Crafty Tactics II *FWEEEEEEEE*

The referee blew the whistle a few seconds later and signaled for team Rosenborg to take the set-piece.

Zachary had already decided to take the free-kick short since the position of the set-piece was quite a distance away from Benfica's goal. So, he just flicked the ball to Takumi Minamino, his counterpart in midfield, after hearing the whistle.

Takumi Minamino controlled the ball with a sense of urgency. Before the Benfica players could step forward to intercept him, he passed the ball back to Zachary, who had just run into space in the middle.

Zachary received the ball mid-sprint. He executed an elastico dribble to circumvent André Gomes, one of the Benfica midfielders, before continuing towards Benfica's goal. He pumped his legs like pistons of a race car as he rushed through the middle of the field until he ran into a blockade of two more Benfica players. They were Enzo Pérez and Rúben Amorim.

Zachary's eyes narrowed as his mind went into overdrive mode. His incredible spatial awareness worked wonders, and he picked out the position of his teammates within an instant. Before the two opponents could close him down, he passed the ball to Nicki Nielsen, Rosenborg's center-forward.

After that, Zachary continued rushing forward with the intent to open himself up at the edge of the box for the return pass from Nicki. But once again, Zachary felt another tug on his shirt as he bypassed the two opponents. He glanced to the side and noticed Enzo Pérez, another Benfica midfielder, firmly gripping his shirt.

"Ref!" Zachary shouted and stopped in his tracks. He raised his arms to gain the referee's attention. However, the referee just nodded at him and indicated for play to continue. It seemed the referee was playing the advantage since Rosenborg was still in possession of the ball.

Zachary was frustrated. He shook his head again and focused on Nicki, who was still with the ball at the left corner of the eighteen-yard box. The striker flicked the ball from one foot to the other, and when the angle opened up, he unleashed a curling shot towards the inside of the far post.

However, Artur Moraes, the Benfica keeper, was alert. He committed himself to a full-body dive before comfortably saving the ball. He had managed to intercept Rosenborg's first genuine shot on goal during the 29th minute.

Zachary could hardly contain his frustration while watching the Benfica keeper holding the ball. If Enzo Pérez hadn't pulled at his shirt, he would have managed to run into an unmarked pocket of space just before the box and received Nicki's return pass. Then, Zachary would have been in the perfect position to test Benfica's keeper. But due to the craftiness of the opponents, he'd missed the opportunity.

An even more aggravating fact was that the referee had chosen to play the advantage instead of awarding Rosenborg a free-kick. As a result, he'd once again denied Zachary a clear opportunity to have a go at Benfica's goal. Thinking about all that, Zachary grew more annoyed with the way the referee was handling the game.

The match continued, and Rosenberg grew bolder and launched more attacks on Benfica's box. All the Rosenberg players played with a sense of urgency as they utilized a combination of wing play and through passes through the middle, trying to break down Benfica's defense. They were obviously trying their hardest to score the opening goal.

However, the Benfica players remained solid defensively throughout the rest of the first half. In particular, they marked Zachary Bemba, Rosenberg's playmaker, and denied him any chance to create chances or take shots on goal. And if they couldn't stop him fair and square, they would foul him to ensure that he wouldn't break past them. They did everything possible to thwart Rosenberg's attacks — and as a result, the score remained two goals to nil in favor of Benfica as the players matched down the tunnel for halftime.

The atmosphere in Benfica's dressing room was a jolly one. The players were all smiles as they settled down around the benches in the dressing room. They were obviously in a good mood since they were already two goals ahead in the first leg of their Europa League semi-final clash against Rosenberg.

"We made some risky plays during the first half, Rúben," André Gomes, one of the Benfica midfielders, said as he settled down on one of the benches in the dressing room. "We were lucky to walk away with only a single yellow card after the first half."

"What matters is that we've already obtained a two-goal lead," Rúben replied. "And do you remember the coach's instructions before the game? He instructed us to do whatever it took to stop Zachary from picking up his rhythm and making runs into our final third."

"I understand," André said after chugging down some water. "But I still have some doubts about the incident that led to your yellow card. At that moment, I had already noticed Enzo covering us from behind. Thus, we were three people marking Zachary at the time, and Enzo would have been in the perfect position to stop Zachary's run. So, why did you commit the foul that led to your yellow card?"

Rúben's eyes narrowed. "Are you sure that Enzo would have been able to stop Zachary? Don't you think that there was a possibility of him making another of his signature runs into our box if I hadn't stopped him?"

"That, I'm not sure," André said. "I'm only worried about your yellow card. Your chances of receiving a red card are now quite high, especially since you're still up against Zachary during the second half."

"Don't worry," Rúben said with a smile. "I know what I'm doing. Since I'm already on a yellow card, I won't commit any more dangerous fouls against him. The next time he tries to break through us, it will be your turn to take one for the team and stop him by whatever means possible. Then, after that, Enzo will commit the foul if necessary. As long as we keep on rotating, all of us will be able to avoid accumulating cautions and receiving red cards."

André chuckled. "You're really sinister."

"No, I'm not," Rúben said, beaming. "I'm only trying my best to qualify for the finals."

The players continued holding discussions in small groups until Coach Jorge Jesus took center stage two minutes later.

The coach's tone was somber as he urged the players to stay on guard to ensure that Rosenberg wouldn't score any goal that day. He specifically reminded the midfielders and defenders to continue frustrating Zachary so that they would limit Rosenberg's attacking prowess. After that, he assigned a few more individual roles before sending them back to the pitch.

Chapter 376 Twists and Turns The match recommenced after the fifteen minutes of halftime. The Rosenberg players immediately switched to a more versatile 4-3-3 formation and soon started passing the ball around steadily. They hoarded the majority of the possession as they searched for an opportunity to score their opening goal.

Eventually, the ball made its way to Zachary, who had just run into an unmarked pocket of space close to the center circle. He brought it under control with a simple touch as he glanced around.

In a flash, he assessed the situation around him and managed to form a mental map of all the opponents and teammates around him. The next moment, he unleashed a lofted pass towards the flanks to find Karl Toko Ekambi, Rosenberg's right-winger for the day.

The flanks were relatively uncrowded as Benfica had already switched to a narrow 4-3-2-1 formation to avail more numbers in the middle to tight mark their most deadly opponent - Zachary Bemba. So, there wasn't any contender marking Karl Toko Ekambi when he connected with Zachary's pass on the right flank.

Ekambi remained composed as he brought the ball under control with his chest close to the touchline. Then, he started feeding it in front of himself as he exploded with speed, dashing towards the other side of the pitch like a bullet train.

In a few seconds, Ekambi made it past the border of the final third and ran into the first blockade in the form of Guilherme Siqueira, Benfica's left-back. He chose not to tango with the approaching Benfica defender but instead slowed down before quickly unleashing a curling cross towards Benfica's box.

In the box: Nicki Nielsen escaped the pestering of Luisão, Benfica's center-back, to connect with the ball. He timed his run perfectly and leaped high to plant a deadly header towards the top right corner.

The effort was promising, and Zachary's heartbeat quickened as he watched the ball zooming towards the goal like an arrow. It floated over the outstretched fingertips of Benfica's keeper before continuing onwards—towards the top right corner.

But the next moment, the ball seemed to veer off its course slightly before smashing off the goal post and rebounding into the box. Zachary's mood soured as Nicki's effort was off target by mere centimeters.

"Damn it!" Zachary cursed inwardly. Adrenaline flooded his systems as he prepared to resume his sprint into Benfica's box—to chase after the rebounded ball. But at that moment, he noticed Ezequiel Garay, the other Benfica center-back, pouncing on the ball and quickly clearing it out of the box.

Zachary's spirits soared again. He realized that Ezequiel's clearance wasn't the best, and his sharp mind deduced that the just-cleared ball's trajectory was straight towards him. So, he relaxed his posture and waited motionlessly in his position, just a few yards away from the arc of the 18-yard box.

All the distracting thoughts faded from his mind, and the time seemed to come to a standstill. As expected, the just-cleared ball descended towards his position and grew more pronounced in his vision.

He pounced forward and drew his left leg all the way back before swinging it down like a whip. His timing was immaculate, and he met the incoming ball with a ferocious kick on a volley.

"BAM!"

A sense of contentment filled his heart as the sweet sound of his boot connecting with the ball reverberated in his ears. And the next instant, the ball whooshed back from whence it had come like a surface-to-surface missile. It tore through the air like a lightning bolt before ricocheting off the crossbar and bouncing into the back of the net. Due to the sheer velocity of the shot, the keeper hadn't reacted and could only turn back to watch the ball nestle in the back of the net.

SL Benfica 2 : Rosenborg BK 1

For a moment, a wave of silence swept across the stadium. It was as if the fans were still processing what had just transpired. Then, the next instant, thunderous cheers emerged from the section of the stands allocated to the away team's supporters. More than 20,000 voices soon blended into a booming chorus as the traveling Rosenborg fans chanted Zachary's name.

On the sidelines, Coach Jorge Jesus was frowning deeply. His mood turned sour as he watched the Rosenborg players celebrating their goal. Before the game, he had warned his midfielders to mark Zachary during every moment of the game. But they had relaxed a bit and left the young playmaker unmarked for a moment during the opening minutes of the second half. In so doing, they'd allowed him to score Rosenborg's first goal during the 48th minute.

Moreover, an even more worrying fact was that Rosenborg was back into the game due to their away goal. Thus, as long as the Norwegian giants could score another goal, they would tie the game and place themselves in an advantageous position before the second leg of the Europa League's semi-final battle scheduled for the following week. Then, the Rosenborg players would most likely put up a better display while playing in front of their supporters on their home ground in Trondheim. In the end, they would eliminate Benfica and qualify for the finals.

Coach Jorge Jesus shuddered despite himself as he thought about the possibility. He immediately decided to introduce a more defensive-minded midfielder into the game. His intent was to contain Zachary Bemba and the rest of the Rosenborg attackers during the remaining minutes of the second half.

"Fejsa!" The coach called out as he turned towards the bench. "Come here for a moment."

"Yes, coach." The defensive midfielder immediately rose from his seat before stepping toward the coach. His eyes were brimming with expectation as he awaited the coach's instructions.

Coach Jorge Jesus placed a hand on the midfielder's shoulder before saying, "In a bit, I'll substitute you in for Cardozo. Your only role for the rest of the game is to mark Zachary, Rosenborg's playmaker. Stay on him for every moment of the game, and don't allow him to shoot or create goal-scoring opportunities. Can you manage that?"

Ljubomir Fejsa narrowed his eyes as he stole a peek towards the pitch, where gameplay had just restarted. "Coach," he said. "Zachary is a difficult opponent to mark. However, I'll give my all to keep him in check during the rest of the game. That's what I can promise."

"Great," the coach said, patting Fejsa's shoulder. "As long as you try your best and make sure that he doesn't score again, you'll have done a great service for the team. Go and prepare quickly. I want you on the pitch in five minutes."

"Aye, coach," Fejsa replied before stepping away to start his warm-up.

On the pitch, the game continued, and the Benfica players seemed to become more proactive in their style of play after conceding a goal. They started utilizing quick short passes around the pitch as they advanced towards Rosenborg's box. Before long, the ball found its way to Enzo Pérez, one of Benfica's midfielders, and he immediately flicked it to Rodrigo Machado.

Rodrigo Machado, Benfica's right-winger, brought the ball under control close to the touchline on the right flank. He whirled around to skip past his marker before exploding with speed. He sprinted with the ball along the touchline — and before long; he unleashed a cross towards Rosenborg's box.

It was a dangerous cross, especially since it was curling and on course towards Óscar Cardozo, Benfica's center-forward. Fortunately for Rosenborg, Yerry Mina leaped high and battled Cardozo for aerial superiority before heading the ball away from the box.

The tall Colombian's clearance had saved Rosenborg from conceding another goal in the 52nd minute. As a result, the Benfica fans around the stadium could only let out bitter sighs as the ball zoomed back towards the border of the final third, where Thomas Partey was lurking.

Thomas Partey chested the ball to the ground while exhibiting a sense of urgency. He turned and twisted away from an opponent before squaring a pass to Takumi Minamino. The latter took one touch before glancing up briefly and passing the ball to Zachary.

Zachary ran away from his bodyguards and met the ball close to the center circle. Before any other opponent could close him down, he flicked it to the left wing to find Alexander Söderlund, Rosenborg's left-winger. He then circumvented his opponents and continued sprinting towards the other side of the pitch.

Just as he was about to step past the border of the final third, he received a return pass from Alexander Söderlund. He controlled the ball mid-sprint and executed side steps to skip past Rúben Amorim, Benfica's defensive midfielder. But the next moment, just as Zachary was beginning to accelerate, Rúben stretched out a boot and tripped him. And before Zachary could realize what was happening, he was already tumbling to the ground.

FWEEEEEEEE

The referee blew the whistle even before Zachary or any other Rosenborg player could complain. He rushed to the scene and showed Rúben the second yellow card for the night. But he didn't just stop at that. He also showed a red card to the defensive midfielder before awarding Rosenborg a free-kick.

The Benfica players immediately surrounded the referee and argued against the decision. But the referee shook his head and turned a deaf ear to their complaints. He remained expressionless as he motioned for Rúben to march out of the pitch.

Zachary smiled as he picked himself up from the ground. Many Benfica players had been fouling him ever since the start of the game. He'd been frustrated since they had gotten away with committing the fouls on several occasions. But after seeing one of them receive a red card, he felt a wave of relief wash over him. He was really in the best of moods, especially since the red-carded opponent was Rúben Amorim — a player who had harassed him verbally on several occasions.

A minute later, Benfica's coach made a substitution and brought on Ljubomir Fejsa in place of Óscar Cardozo. After that, the game recommenced with Rosenborg's set-piece.

Zachary took the free-kick and unleashed a lofted pass behind the defensive line. However, it resulted in nothing as none of his teammates managed to connect with the ball. In the end, the keeper saved the ball, and the gameplay continued.

For the remaining minutes of the second half, the Rosenborg players launched endless waves of offensives on Benfica's box. They utilized their numerical advantage to dictate the tempo and dominate proceedings on the pitch. And whenever opportunities arose, they would even unleash heavy shots towards the goal as they searched for the equalizer against Benfica.

However, the ten Benfica players remaining on the pitch parked the bus in front of their goal to frustrate Rosenborg's efforts. They focused only on defense and thwarted all Rosenborg's chances for the remainder of the second half. As a result, the score remained 2:1 in favor of Benfica when the final whistle sounded after five minutes of injury time.

Chapter 377 A Busy Week Coach Johansen stood silently on one side of the dressing room while waiting for his players to undress after the game. He was in low spirits due to his team's loss against Benfica. But, as the head coach, he couldn't allow himself to wallow in despair since he had to maintain his authoritative image before his players.

"Okay, guys," he said after a few more minutes. "Settle down, and let's discuss a few things."

The players responded by settling down on the benches around the dressing room. They were quieter than usual — a tell-tale sign that they were not in the best of moods. The loss against Benfica had obviously hit them hard and tarnished their night.

"We've just lost the game against Benfica," Coach Johansen said after all the players had taken their seats. "But we have to move on and prepare for our next games. We have to remain positive and in high spirits, especially since we still have a chance to accomplish a comeback during the second leg of the Europa League semi-finals. And as long as we don't allow the loss to affect our momentum as a team, we'll surely have a chance to bounce back and revenge when Benfica comes to Trondheim on Thursday next week."

"Tonight, when you head back to your hotel rooms, take some time to reflect on our loss. Think of reasons that prevented us from winning, and let's learn from this defeat and use it as a stepping stone. Let's shape our determination so as to ensure that we perform better next week. And if we learn from this defeat and remain positive, I'm sure that we'll squash Benfica and qualify for the Europa League final. Are you with me?"

"Yes, coach," the players replied. However, their voices lacked vigor and passion.

"Are you guys with me?" The coach raised his voice as he swept his gaze across the players.

"Yes, coach," the players replied more energetically.

"Good," Coach Johansen said, nodding. "As the saying goes, bad things do happen, but how we respond to them defines our character and the quality of our lives. We can choose to sit in perpetual sadness, immobilized by the gravity of our loss, or choose to rise from the pain. We can choose to learn, to use failure as a stepping stone, and that's how we will be able to walk far on the road to success. And that's how we qualify for the finals and even win the Europa League. Are you guys with me?"

"Yes, coach."

"I know we're all tired after the game," the coach continued after stealing a peek at his watch and lowering his voice. "So, I won't waste time going over the post-match analysis. Let's head to the hotel and enjoy some dinner. After that, we'll immediately return to our rooms to rest since we have to catch

an early morning flight back to Trondheim tomorrow. As for further discussions about the game, we'll have them on Saturday when you've all recovered from the post-match fatigue. Do you follow?"

"Yes, coach."

"Excellent." The coach nodded and dismissed the players.

The following morning, the Rosenborg players boarded an early morning flight and returned to Trondheim. And as planned, they took Friday off from team training to recover from the post-match fatigue. Then, on Saturday, they returned to the training ground to prepare for Rosenborg's domestic league fixture against Sportsklubben Brann, scheduled to be played the following evening.

Since they only had a few hours on Saturday to prepare, the coaches kept the training simple and brief. They took the players through a dynamic conditioning routine during the morning hours. And in the evening, they went over the tactics before sending the players back to their homes to rest.

The night passed, and then Sunday morning came. The hours flashed by, and in the evening, when an hour still remained before the scheduled kick-off time, the players who had made Coach Johansen's squad congregated at Lerkendal. And what wasn't surprising was that Coach Johansen had rested all his first-team players, including Zachary, Nicki Nielsen, Takumi Minamino, etcetera. So, once again, it was Rosenborg's second team that would feature in that domestic Sunday fixture against Sportsklubben Brann.

The players went over their last-minute preparations on the training ground under the strict supervision of the Rosenborg coaches as the minutes flashed by quickly. Eventually, the clock hands around Trondheim pointed to the six o'clock mark, and the match began with Rosenborg's kick-off.

From the very first minute of the game, Rosenborg's second team showed who was the big boss on the Norwegian football scene. The Troll Kids still dominated proceedings and dictated the tempo even though their star players were absent. They hoarded all the possession and soon started creating clear-cut chances on goal. And before long, the opportunity to score the first goal arrived naturally.

Mike Jensen, Rosenborg's defensive midfielder, controlled the ball skillfully to skip past a tackle from an opponent close to the center circle. When the passing angle opened up, he unleashed a through-pass towards the other side of the pitch—where Riku Riski was lurking.

Riku Riski, Rosenborg's right-winger for the day, connected with the pin-point pass close to the touchline on the right flank. He immediately fed the ball past the opposing left-back before beating him for pace. Soon, he unleashed a curling cross towards the box to find John Chibuike, the center-forward. The latter leaped high and outjumped the defenders before planting a header into the right corner of the net to score Rosenborg's 1st goal during the 24th minute of gameplay.

Twenty minutes later, just a minute before halftime, Jonas Svensson, the Rosenborg right-back for the day, converted a free-kick from the edge of the box. He curled the ball perfectly over the defensive wall to score Rosenborg's second goal for the night.

During the second half, the Rosenborg players played a bit more conservatively. They only launched a few fierce attacks against Sportsklubben Brann, which didn't amount to anything. And eventually, team Rosenborg maintained its lead and won by a score of two goals to nil at the end of the evening battle.

The victory against Sportsklubben Brann cemented Rosenborg's position at the top of the table and elevated the atmosphere around the team. As a result, the players and coaches were in high gear when they returned to training the following morning. Without wasting time, they commenced preparations for the second leg fixture of the Europa League semi-final against Benfica. They worked tirelessly over the next three days as they tried their best to elevate their match fitness while also refining the tactics for the upcoming game.

Eventually, Wednesday evening arrived, and Coach Johansen summoned the players to the tactics room for the pre-match briefing. He explained the game plan and went over the tactics during the first twenty minutes before naming his line-up for the game. After that, he assigned individual roles to players and then sent them back to their homes for the night.

At last, Rosenborg had completed all the necessary preparations. What remained was for the players to step on the pitch the following night to perform against Benfica.

Lerkendal Stadion, Rosenborg's Home Ground, Trondheim, Norway.

Time: 9:05 PM.

FWEEEEEEE

The referee blew the whistle that signaled the start of the second leg of the Europa League semi-final battle between Rosenborg BK and SL Benfica. The cheers around the stadium rose to thunderous heights within an instant as Nicki Nielsen, Rosenborg's center-forward, kicked off the game by passing the ball back into his midfield.

The match was finally underway, and the players of both teams quickly arrayed themselves into their respective playing formations as they tried to outmaneuver one another.

On the side of Rosenborg, there was almost no change to the squad that played Benfica away in Lisbon. Daniel Örlund, Rosenborg's experienced and ever-reliable number-1, was in goal, while the defense comprised the four players - Mikael Dorsin, Tore Reginiussen, Yerry Mina, and Eric Bailly.

Up the pitch, Thomas Partey, Zachary Bemba, and Takumi Minamino took up the reigns in midfield. And lastly, the three players — Paul Kasongo on the right, Alexander Söderlund on the left, and Nicki Nielsen as center-forward in the middle completed Rosenborg's 4-3-3 formation for the night.

Similarly, on the side of Benfica, there weren't any significant changes to the set-up from the previous week, save for the missing Rúben Amorim, who'd received a red card for his accumulated fouls on Zachary Bemba.

In Benfica's goal, there was Artur Moraes as keeper, while the four players - Guilherme Siqueira, Ezequiel Garay, Luisão, and Maximiliano Pereira were the bastions in defense.

In midfield, Benfica utilized five players. They included André Gomes, Ljubomir Fejsa, and Enzo Pérez as the three central midfielders, while Miralem Sulejmani and Rodrigo Moreno Machado played

on the left and right flanks, respectively. Finally, Óscar Cardozo was the only center-forward on the striking line to complete Benfica's 4-5-1 formation.

Both teams tried to settle down during the opening minutes of the game. The players were conservative in their approach, and by the 15th minute, both teams were still neck and neck in various statistics. Be it the ball possession, the number of corner kicks, or the zero number of shots on target — they were equally matched, with neither side getting the better of the other.

The proceedings moved forward, seemingly at a slow pace due to the defensive tactics employed by both teams. But then, during the 16th minute, just when the fans had started to grow tired of the tedious football on the pitch, a lightning-fast change transpired.

Zachary Bemba, who had been kept silent by the Benfica midfielders during the first quarter of an hour, worked his magic for the first time on the night. He made a spontaneous and daring off-ball run towards the other side of the pitch to catch the opponents unawares and connect with a lofted pass over Benfica's midfield from Thomas Partey.

Ljubomir Fejsa, Benfica's defensive midfielder for the night, tried to stop Zachary by harassing him as he chested the ball close to the border of the final third. But Zachary remained composed and steadfast as he brought the ball to the ground before twisting and turning away from the opponent.

His incredible spatial awareness immediately combined with his Zinedine-Pirlo Juju to work like a charm. And in anything but an instant, he managed to spot that Nicki Nielsen was at that exact moment starting to make a run past Benfica's defensive line.

Zachary's heartbeat started racing as his hopes instantly soared into the night sky. He immediately spun around with the ball glued to his boot to complete an improvised version of the Marseille turn. The brilliant move took him past another opponent — and when the passing angle opened up; he unleashed a through-pass towards Nicki, who was already on a straight sprinting course towards Benfica's box.

The cheers around Lerkendal Stadium soon hit a thunderous crescendo as Nicki Nielsen connected with Zachary's defense-splitting pass. The center-forward controlled the ball mid-sprint after escaping from Benfica's two center-forwards. He then accelerated and continued dashing toward Benfica's goal as if his life was on the line.

Artur Moraes, Benfica's goalkeeper, soon came out of goal to meet the approaching Nicki. However, Nicki remained composed and rounded the keeper with a simple deft touch before burying the ball into the back of the net to score Rosenborg's 1st goal for the night in the 17th minute. He then rushed towards the corner flag before sliding onto his knees to celebrate his goal.

Rosenborg BK 1 (2) : SL Benfica 0 (2)

Both Kristin and Emily were also in the stadium, watching the game. When Nicki buried the ball into the back of the net, they also started yelling and jumping along with the rest of the fans around them to celebrate Rosenborg's first goal.

"We're going to the finals," Kristin, who was in Rosenborg's black and white colors, hollered out while waving her scarf. A bright smile had already lit up her face as she was really excited.

At the beginning of the season, she wasn't expecting her team to qualify from the group stages. But step by step, the Rosenborg players, especially Zachary, had exceeded all her expectations and defeated a series of tough opponents before qualifying for the semi-finals. But that wasn't the end of the Troll Kids' success story in the Europa League. Once again, that night, they were already putting up another powerful display in the semis. And going by the away-goal rule, they might be the team qualifying for the next round if they could maintain their 1:0 lead for the rest of the game.

Kristin could hardly contain her delight as all the past victories plus potential prospects of Rosenborg ran through her mind. Her smile brightened even further as she continued cheering and jumping along with the rest of the fans while keeping her eyes on the celebrating Rosenborg players on the pitch.

"Rosenborg one, and Benfica zero," the voice of Kjell Roar, the commentator, reverberated across the stadium when the cheers began dying down. "Courtesy of a brilliant combination play from Zachary Bemba and Nicki Nielsen, Rosenborg is now ahead by a goal in the second leg of the Europa League semi-finals. If Rosenborg can defend well and maintain the one-goal lead for the rest of the game, they'll

secure one of the two tickets to the Europa League finals, based on the away-goal rule. Harald! I can see that you're smiling. You should be in a good mood."

Harald Brattbakk, the pundit for the day, chuckled. "The Rosenborg players and us, Rosenborg fans, are really living the dream. We might really be qualifying for the Europa League finals for the first time ever."

"Hahaha, is that so?" Kjell Roar said. "What's your take on the goal, Harald?"

"As usual, Zachary was brilliant and executed a beautiful play in the midfield to find Nicki with that beautiful pass," Harald replied. "The pass was well-timed, well-placed, and also unexpected. It caught the Benfica players off-guard as it made its way to Nicki. Nicki remained composed and planted the ball into the back of the net. The result shows the beauty of football when two on-form players on a team connect well and achieve perfect chemistry in a moment."

"I've been looking at Rosenborg's statistics in the Europa League this season," Kjell Roar chimed in. "An interesting fact is that every time they scored first during previous Europa League games, they went ahead and won."

"You know," Harald said, "Before the game, I expected Rosenborg to face tough opposition from Benfica. I feared that Benfica would sit back and utilize ultra-defensive tactics — and in so doing, render our often-potent counterattacking tactics useless. But now, after Nicki's goal, I'm really hoping that the Benfica players continue playing defensive football. That would be interesting."

"Your wishful thinking is really commendable." Kjell Roar chuckled. "But, don't hold too much hope as I'm sure that Benfica is about to shift to a higher gear. If the Rosenborg players aren't careful, they might concede a goal and bow out of the Europa League tonight. Football is unpredictable before hearing the final whistle."

"Why the negativity?" Harald questioned. "Are you a Molde supporter, by any chance?"

"This isn't the Tippeligaen!" Kjell Roar said. "Why are you even mentioning Molde at this moment?"

"I'm asking because I'm sure that the Molde fans might be the only people in Norway praying and wishing for Rosenborg to lose this semi-final," Harald replied. "So, are you a Molde supporter?"

Kjell Roar chuckled and chose to ignore the question. "Gameplay has already restarted," he said, his voice rising and booming over all the chatter in the stadium. "Rosenborg has already made an incredible start in tonight's semi-final. However, the million-dollar question is: Can they maintain their one-goal lead against Benfica for the remainder of the game? Or can they score another goal to cement their victory? Let's take you back to the proceedings on the pitch to find out."

Chapter 379 Tactical Responses After conceding the first goal, the Benfica players became more proactive in their approach to the game. They abandoned their ultra-defensive tactics and arrayed themselves into a 4-3-3 attacking formation. Before long, they started launching continuous waves of attacks on Rosenborg's defense by relying on wing-play tactics and defense-splitting passes through the middle.

Benfica's dominance soon exceeded expectations as the midfielders in red and white started feeding more balls to their three attackers. Eventually, their relentless efforts paid off, and during the 34th minute, they created their first clear goal-scoring chance.

Enzo Pérez, one of Benfica's central midfielders, linked up well with Miralem Sulejmani, Benfica's left-winger for the night. The two players exchanged a couple of one-twos on the left flank as they circumvented opponents and speared deep into Rosenborg's half. Soon, they stepped past the border of the final third, and the ball naturally ended at Miralem Sulejmani's feet.

Miralem Sulejmani fed the ball past Tore Reginiussen, Rosenborg's right-back, before beating him for pace. Then, when the passing angle opened up, he unleashed a curling cross towards the edge of Rosenborg's box.

A rare wave of silence soon swept across the stadium as the cross was on point and heading straight towards Óscar Cardozo, the Benfica striker. Fortunately for the Rosenborg fans, Eric Bailly, one of Rosenborg's center-backs for the day, leaped high and headed the incoming ball away.

However, Eric Bailly's clearance wasn't enough to calm the tense nerves of the Rosenborg fans as the ball traveled midair, heading straight towards Rodrigo Machado.

The danger was obviously still at large for team Rosenborg since Rodrigo Machado, Benfica's right-winger, managed to control the ball just outside the box on the right flank. Before any opponent could close him down, he squared a pass into the middle to find André Gomes, Benfica's midfielder.

André Gomes didn't even pause to control the incoming ball. He just drew his leg back like a bow before swinging it down hard and fast to unleash a missile of a shot towards Rosenborg's goal.

TENSION!

It was a tense moment for Rosenborg. The ball rose from the ground and zoomed towards the inside of the right post like a bullet. But once again, Rosenborg's luck was incredible, and the effort bore no fruit.

Daniel Örlund, Rosenborg's experienced and ever-reliable goalkeeper, executed an acrobatic dive and punched the ball to save Rosenborg from conceding an equalizing goal during the 35th minute. The Rosenborg fans around the stadium finally breathed sighs of relief as the ball crossed the line and bounced out of play.

FWEEEEEEEE

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

Most players on the pitch immediately started swarming into Rosenborg's box to ready themselves for the corner. And soon, chaos descended as some players shoved their opponents away while others grabbed shirts while awaiting the corner kick.

The referee soon stepped in and warned a few players from both sides to calm things down. And finally, after a good one minute of tussling and hustling, the order returned to the box, and the referee immediately blew the whistle.

Maximiliano Pereira, Benfica's right-winger, took the corner kick and unleashed a lofted ball into the crowded area before Rosenborg's goal. And it was at that moment the players around and inside the box got into action. Some started running around to confuse opponents, while others leaped high to meet the incoming ball.

But at the end of it all, it was Óscar Cardozo, Benfica's center-forward, who came out on top. He escaped the harassment of one of the Rosenborg defenders before leaping high and planting a header towards the goal.

But once again, luck still seemed to elude team Benfica, and Óscar Cardozo's header ended up smashing off the post before heading out of play for a goal kick. The striker had missed an opportunity to score an equalizer during the 37th minute. He could only glance skyward while shaking his head with regret.

After wasting a few seconds, Daniel Örlund, Rosenborg's goalkeeper, took the goal kick, and the game continued. The Benfica players continued dictating the tempo and launching endless attacks on Rosenborg's box as they searched for the equalizing goal. They really showed the spirit of Portuguese attacking football during the next few minutes of gameplay.

Be that as it may, the Benfica players didn't manage to score no matter how hard they tried. Daniel Örlund saved three of their shots on goal while the other attempts missed the target by mere centimeters. It was as if a powerful shaman had cursed them to remain goalless during the first half.

The proceedings moved forward, and eventually, the first 45 minutes elapsed. To the relief of the many Rosenborg fans around the stadium, the referee immediately blew the whistle without adding a single minute of injury time. As a result, the players could only march down the tunnel when the score was still 1:0 in favor of Rosenborg.

Coach Johansen was in a somber mood as he quietly watched his players settling down on the benches around the dressing room. Even though his team was leading by a goal to nil, he was still tense and nervous. He feared that his team might concede a goal at any given juncture and lose the ticket to the Europa League finals, scheduled to be played two weeks later at the Juventus Stadium in Turin, Italy. So, the coach was eager to reorganize his team's tactics during halftime so that his players would put up a much more potent defensive display during the second half.

"Okay, guys," he said after the players had settled down and hydrated themselves. "Luck was on our side during the first half, and we're winning. But let's not get complacent since there are still 45 minutes of the second half remaining before the end of the game."

"During the late stages of the first half, you all relaxed a bit," the coach continued. "You did not work hard to tight mark and close down the opponents, and in so doing, you allowed them to come at us fiercely. I don't know what caused you to lose concentration, but all I can say is that we were lucky not to concede a goal before halftime."

The coach swept his gaze across his players. "Do you guys wish to qualify for the final?" He asked in a loud voice.

"We do, coach," the players replied almost in chorus.

"Do you dream about winning the Europa League?" Coach Johansen asked again.

"We do, coach," the players once again replied.

"Excellent," the coach said, nodding. "Your objectives are similar to mine as I also wish to win the Europa League this year. But guys! I wish to remind you that no team can win a major European Trophy without a willingness to work hard and put everything into each and every game."

"As the saying goes," the coach lowered his voice as he started pacing around the room, "A dream does not come to reality through magic, but it takes sweat, determination, and hard work. So, when you're on the pitch during the second half, remember why you're fighting and sweating. Remember what you wish to accomplish during every minute and every second of the game. Focus! Concentrate, and then remember to give your all for that dream of winning the Europa League. Guys, do you follow?"

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

"Do you guys follow?" The coach asked again in a louder voice.

"Yes, coach," the players yelled back.

"Great," the coach said. "Now that we're on the same page, I'll go over the second-half adjustments. First and foremost, we'll switch to a 4-5-1 formation and play a defensive game during the

second half, meaning that the two flank players will have to drop back and play as midfielders for the rest of the game. We'll remain patient and weather Benfica's attacks since we're already ahead by a goal. In so doing, we'll tempt Benfica to move forward and relax their defensive efforts. And when an opportunity arises, we counterattack and try to score. Are you guys with me?"

"Yes, coach."

"Excellent." Coach Johansen nodded and turned towards Zachary. "Zachary! The three opposing midfielders are zone-marking you once again during this game. So, as we talked about before, you must remain mobile on the pitch to render their efforts useless. You can switch into the wing and the defensive midfield positions more often. That way, you'll force your opponents to leave their positions if they insist on continuing to mark you. The rest of your teammates can then utilize the gaps the opposing midfielders leave in midfield to launch counterattacks and possibly create goal-scoring chances. Do you follow, Zachary?"

"Yes, coach," Zachary replied. "I understand."

"Then, I'm glad." Coach Johansen nodded and glanced at his watch. "The fifteen minutes of halftime are almost over. So, it's time for us to head back to the pitch for the second half. But, please remember to play as a team and remember to work hard for every moment of the game. As long as you can accomplish that, we'll become the victors tonight. Have I made myself clear?"

"Yes, coach."

"Excellent," Coach Johansen said, beaming. "Since everything is in order, let's prepare and head back to the pitch."

Chapter 380 Dire Circumstances After the fifteen-minute halftime break, the game continued. The Benfica players didn't waste time dictating the tempo and controlling the flow again. By relying on their versatile 4-3-3 formation, they soon hoarded a large percentage of the possession as they searched for that one equalizing goal that would put them on level terms with Rosenborg.

However, team Benfica's efforts were rendered futile again and again by the defensive tactics of Rosenborg. The Troll Kids adapted quickly and responded well to Benfica's attacks during the opening stages of the second half. They followed Coach Johansen's game plan to the letter and arrayed

themselves into a 4-5-1 defensive shape to weather Benfica's relentless waves of offensives. Their teamwork was commendable, and even the attack-minded players, like Zachary, Takumi, and Nicki Nielsen, fell back to defend.

The minutes flashed by, and the Benfica players continued launching endless waves of attacks against Rosenborg. The Benfica attackers were on fire, and whenever opportunities arose, they would unleash long and mid-range shots towards the goal. They were obviously pulling out all stops to score the equalizing goal.

But again, due to Rosenborg's team discipline and ultra-defensive tactics, team Benfica repeatedly fell short and failed to score. And despite the fact that team Benfica had more than fifteen shots on target by the 85th minute of gameplay, the score remained 1:0 in favor of Rosenborg.

On the side of Benfica, anxieties were already running high as the game approached its closing stages. There were only five minutes plus injury time remaining to the end of the game. So, Benfica had to score a goal soon and bring the proceedings back to level terms. Otherwise, the Portuguese side would have to bow out of the Europa League that very night.

On the sidelines: Coach Jorge Jesus was a nervous wreck, and he couldn't sit still any longer. He made a snap decision and immediately introduced three substitutions into the game when the ball went out of play for a Benfica throw-in. He brought on André Almeida - an attack-minded wing-back, Lima dos Santos - a center-forward, and Ivan Cavaleiro - a left-winger. The three substitutes replaced the seemingly out-of-stamina Miralem Sulejmani - a left-winger, Óscar Cardozo - a center-forward, and André Gomes - a defensive midfielder.

FWEEEEEEE

The referee blew the whistle, signaling for team Benfica to take the throw-in after the three substitutes had taken up their positions on the pitch.

André Almeida, the substitute right-back, immediately went into action to take the throw-in. He planted his feet before the touchline on the right flank and threw the ball towards Enzo Pérez, one of Benfica's three midfielders.

Enzo Pérez shrugged off Takumi Minamino before stepping forward to meet the ball. He brought it to the ground before whirling around and squaring a pass to Ljubomir Fejsa, his counterpart in midfield.

Ljubomir Fejsa controlled the ball skillfully to skip past Nicki Nielsen. He then shoved the ball forward with the tip of his boot before kicking it towards the right wing to find Rodrigo Moreno Machado.

Rodrigo, Benfica's right-winger for the night, leaped high and chested the ball close to the touchline. Before any opponents could close him down, he brought it down to the green before passing it into the middle of the field to find Enzo Pérez. The latter also exhibited a sense of urgency as he received the ball and immediately flicked it back to his right to pick out André Almeida on the right flank.

André Almeida received the ball and fed it past Mikael Dorsin, Rosenborg's left-back. He then circumvented Mikael before exploding with pace on the right flank. Soon, he stepped into the final third and let loose a curling cross towards Rosenborg's box.

However, the cross didn't bear any fruit since Eric Bailly, Rosenborg's center-back, outjumped the rest of the players in the box before heading the ball out of play.

FWEEEEEEE

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

The Benfica players quickly swarmed into Rosenborg's box, and the referee blew the whistle again. André Almeida, the substitute right-back, took the corner kick and floated in a teasing ball into the crowded box.

At that moment, all the players within Rosenborg's box went into motion. They all struggled to outmaneuver their opponents before leaping high to meet the corner ball. But in the end, it was Lima dos Santos, Benfica's substitute center-forward, who got the last laugh. The striker timed his jump well and battled Mikael Dorsin in the air before planting a header towards the inside of the right post.

Daniel Örlund, Rosenborg's keeper, reacted almost instantly to save the effort with an acrobatic dive. However, the sheer power behind the header rendered his efforts futile. The ball floated past his outstretched fingertips by mere centimeters before homing into the back of the net.

Rosenborg BK 1 (2) : SL Benfica 1 (3)

SILENCE!

A wave of silence swept across Lerkendal Stadium as Benfica had managed to score the equalizing goal during the 88th minute of gameplay. With only two minutes plus added time remaining to the end of the game, the Benfica players had accomplished a comeback. They were finally ahead of Rosenborg by a goal when considering the aggregate score. And if they could defend well during the last few minutes and stop Rosenborg from scoring again, they would be the team heading to Turin for the Europa League finals.

In the stands, the Rosenborg fans could only place their hands on their heads as they watched the Benfica players celebrating the goal. The goal had obviously ruined their morale.

During the previous Europa League fixtures, their club had come out on top against tough European teams like Juventus, Lyon, and Fiorentina. But that night, they were on the cusp of losing to Benfica — a side that was much weaker than most of their previous opponents. The fact was demoralizing, and most Rosenborg fans felt their hearts slowly sinking into the abyss of desperation.

"Damn it! Damn it!" One of the fans in Rosenborg's black and white colors cursed. His name was John Hansen, and he was a part-time YouTuber and a driver who had once driven Zachary from the airport. At that moment, the frustration he was feeling had already soared past the stadium's roof and shot into the night sky. His eyes were red, and his fists clenched tightly.

What was more vexing was that he had even placed a relatively large bet on the match. Due to his confidence in Zachary's prolific form, he had utilized all his annual savings to place the bet on Rosenborg

winning the second leg and qualifying for the final. But just when the match was about to end, the damn Benfica had scored an equalizer, messing up his hopes and dreams. As a result, he was a couple of times more depressed than most other Rosenborg supporters in the stadium.

"Can we really accomplish another comeback? Can we overcome this hurdle and qualify for the finals?" John Hansen mumbled as he fidgeted about in his seat. He was uneasy, especially since he had a weird feeling that Rosenborg's luck spell in the Europa League had finally ended.
