

Greatest 381

Chapter 381 The Power of Instincts A rare smile lit up Coach Jorge Jesus' face as he watched his players celebrating the goal. His players had finally met his expectations and scored a late equalizer. As a result, his team was just minutes away from securing one of the two tickets to that year's Europa League finals.

Coach Jorge Jesus breathed in deeply to calm himself down. Due to his long experience as a coach, he understood that he couldn't relax before hearing the final whistle. He had to continue encouraging and instructing his players to ensure that they would remain focused during the rest of the game.

"Fejsa! Enzo!" He yelled at the top of his voice after the Benfica players had just finished celebrating the goal. "Stay focused during the remaining few minutes and mark Zachary. Watch him at all times, and don't allow him to hurt us when we're only minutes away from the finals. Clear?"

The two midfielders responded by raising their thumbs to indicate that they had gotten the message. They then turned their gazes away from the sidelines and returned to their starting positions in Benfica's half. Judging by their body language, they were ready to try their best to mark Zachary until the final whistle sounded.

Coach Jorge Jesus let out another long, drawn-out breath to calm his still racing heart. He couldn't let anything go wrong during the final minutes of the semi-final since he wanted to win. So, he spent a few more seconds hollering out more instructions to ensure that his players understood their roles during the remaining minutes of gameplay.

On the pitch, the gameplay was about to restart.

Zachary was already in his starting midfield position, just outside the edge of the center circle. He was expressionless and at peace with the world as he waited for the referee to blow the whistle to restart the match.

A minute back, he'd been depressed after his team conceded the equalizing goal, especially that late in the game. But after pondering for a few seconds, he'd gotten his priorities straight and decided to prioritize what was crucial. He'd pushed all his worries about the game's result to the back of his mind

and forced himself to attain an incredible state of calmness. So, there were no distracting thoughts in his mind, and his focus was only on the opponents on the other side of the pitch.

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The referee blew the whistle, and Nicki Nielsen immediately passed the ball to Zachary to restart the game.

Zachary pounced forward and controlled the ball at the edge of the center circle. Without wasting a moment, he turned around and passed it to Takumi Minamino, his counterpart in midfield.

Takumi was also quick on the ball. He utilized a simple deft touch to quickly control the ball before kicking it towards the flanks to find Mikael Dorsin, Rosenborg's left-back. The latter also brought it under control swiftly and then passed it ahead to Alexander Söderlund, Rosenborg's left-winger for the night.

But by then, the Benfica players had already swarmed into Rosenborg's half to high-press and stop Rosenborg from settling down and building momentum. So, Alexander Söderlund was under immense pressure from Benfica's right-winger as he controlled the ball close to the flanks.

Be that as it may, Alexander remained composed and shrugged off the opponent before flicking the ball back to Mikael.

Mikael was also facing pressure from a Benfica attacker at the moment. He also chose to immediately pass the ball all the way back to find Daniel Örlund, Rosenborg's keeper.

However, even after the ball made its way to the keeper's feet, the Benfica attackers didn't let up the pressure. Lima dos Santos, Benfica's center-forward, quickly closed in on Daniel Örlund without allowing him to settle down with the ball. As a result, Daniel Örlund could only choose to kick the ball far and away toward the other side of the pitch, where Zachary was lurking.

Zachary, who was close to the center circle at the moment, immediately got into action. His long strides ate up half a dozen yards of space in a couple of seconds, and he managed to get to the descending ball before any other player on the pitch.

He didn't even bother to slow down to bring the ball under control. Instead, he headed it forward before chasing after it like the wind. He was eager to advance the attack as fast as possible since he understood that time wasn't on his side. However, the situation on the field couldn't allow him to do as he pleased, and he immediately ran into two roadblocks in the form of Ljubomir Fejsa and Enzo Pérez, the two Benfica midfielders.

Zachary's football instincts started tingling, and he immediately had a feeling that the two opponents wanted to foul him. His mind went into overdrive mode, and his spatial awareness combined with his Zinedine-Pirlo mental Juju. His vision of the pitch widened, and within an instant, he picked out a passing route before flicking the ball to his right to find Takumi Minamino.

After that, Zachary didn't bother to check whether Takumi had received the ball. Instead, he chose to circumvent the two opponents as quickly as possible before continuing toward the other side of the pitch. He didn't halt his dash for anything as he expected Takumi to read his move before reacting appropriately.

A few seconds later, Zachary relaxed when he noticed that Takumi hadn't disappointed. The midfielder had already looped the ball over the two defenders with a simple chip to find Zachary again. So, Zachary stretched out his boot and controlled the ball mid-sprint before continuing his mad dash towards Benfica's box.

Adrenaline continued flooding into Zachary's systems, and his instincts totally took over the control of his body. His mind was blank as he circumvented another opponent and skipped over a dangerous tackle while bearing down on Benfica's box like a raging Tsunami.

He utilized various skills, including side-steps, body feints, and elastico dribbles to elude more opponents. And before long, he skipped past another tackle and approached the edge of the eighteen yard box. His instincts started tingling again, and he immediately decided to go with his gut and shoot the ball.

He didn't slow down his actions to deliberate as he was sure that his opponents were on his heels. He drew his left leg back and delivered a ferocious kick onto the ball, sending it zooming past an opposing defender's outstretched boot and towards the inside of the left post.

It was a tense moment for the players and fans of both teams, and a rare wave of silence swept across the stadium as the ball soared towards Benfica's goal. The time seemed to slow down before finally coming to a standstill, and then the ball grazed the left post and nestled into the back of the net.

Zachary immediately raised his arms high, and the next moment, a wave of thunderous cheers swept across the stadium. Finally, he had managed to score Rosenborg's second goal for the night during the 91st minute of gameplay. So, he could hardly contain his excitement as he immersed his mind and soul into the booming voices of the home supporters chanting his name.

Chapter 382 The Tense Final Few Minutes -----

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

"Oh! What a magnificent solo run and finish from Zachary!" Kjell Roar, the commentator for the day, yelled in sync with the thunderous cheers around the stadium. "Zachary has worked his magic again and delivered during injury time, with only a few minutes remaining to the final whistle. No one could stop Rosenborg's dangerman as he literally bulldozed his way through Benfica's midfield before shooting from outside the box and scoring Rosenborg's second goal. He has tied the aggregate score, and he has once again kept Rosenborg's Europa League dream alive. What a player!"

"That was really the sensational Zachary at his best," Harald Brattbakk, the pundit for the day, chimed in. "The run was stunning as he had taken off from near the center of the pitch before beating six opponents. After approaching the box, he was decisive enough, and he hammered the ball past Benfica's keeper and into the back of the net. All in all, the goal was really spectacular. It deserves to be the goal of the tournament."

"Speaking of goals," Kjell Roar said, "Zachary has set a new Europa League goal-scoring record tonight. He has pushed his tally to twenty-one goals — and that makes him the only player in history to ever score more than twenty goals in a single Europa League tournament. Surprisingly, he has accomplished the feat at just nineteen years of age and during his first Europa League season as a professional footballer. Truly remarkable!"

"The number of his assists is also close to the top," Harald Brattbakk remarked. "He already has four assists during this Europa League campaign, making him second-placed on the list of top assist-providers. He's only a single assist behind Bibras Natkho - the Rubin Kazan man and Kevin Kampl from Red Bull Salzburg. If he can provide another assist before the end of the tournament, he'll immediately move up to the top of the list."

"Those are some incredible statistics," Kjell Roar said. "I'm really looking forward to his future. But for now, let's focus on the proceedings on the pitch. The gameplay is about to restart, and the aggregate score for this Europa League semi-final battle between Rosenborg Ballklub and SL Benfica is still a tie of 3:3. In Lisbon, Benfica won the first leg by two goals to one. Here in Trondheim, Rosenborg Ballklub is also winning by two goals to one. If either of the teams fails to score during the remaining three minutes of injury time, we'll be heading for extra time. I'm really excited."

"Maybe," Harald Brattbakk said, "Zachary might work his magic again in those remaining two minutes, and then, we won't need to go through the hustle of extra time. I really hope that that is the case."

Kjell Roar chuckled. "I'm at odds with you on that point. Instead, I'm really hoping that we get to witness extra time today. The night is still young, and I'm looking forward to thirty more minutes of football and possibly a penalty shootout."

John Hansen, the part-time YouTuber/driver, was grinning from ear to ear as he followed the last few minutes of the game. He had placed a 150,000 NOK bet on Rosenborg winning the second leg of the Europa League semi-final against Benfica, with returns amounting to 4.4 times the original bet. So, as long as Rosenborg maintained the 2:1 lead for the remaining two minutes of injury time, Hansen would win 660,000 NOK from the betting company. And if Rosenborg could perform even better and eventually qualify for the finals at the end of the game, he would also win another 440,000 NOK from his other bet. Thus, he could hardly contain his excitement at that moment.

"It's Benfica on the attack," the booming voice of the commentator broke John Hansen out of his daydreams. "Enzo Pérez, Benfica's midfielder, controls the ball in the middle third. What wonderful ball-control from the midfielder. He twists and turns away from Takumi Minamino and squares a pass to Rodrigo Moreno Machado on the right-flank..."

John Hansen's attention was on the pitch. He watched with bated breath as Rodrigo Moreno Machado, Benfica's right-winger, controlled the ball before unleashing a teasing cross into the box. Hansen felt like time was moving so slowly, and then the ball descended into the box where Lima dos Santos, Benfica's center-forward, was lurking.

Johns Hansen's heartbeat quickened, and beads of sweat started rolling down his forehead as he watched Lima dos Santos leap over an opponent to connect with the ball. He was even more anxious as the Benfica striker planted a header towards the goal from around the edge of the box.

"Please don't go in, please don't go in..." John Hansen mumbled as he balled his fists. The tension was killing him as the ball was on target and coursing towards the goal. But the next moment, he finally let out a breath as he watched Daniel Örlund, Rosenborg's keeper, snatch the ball out of the air before holding it close to his chest. The Rosenborg shot-stopper had managed to save Rosenborg from conceding the second goal that night during the 95th minute of gameplay.

"Referee, the whistle," all the fans around John Hansen started shouting. "Referee, the five minutes of added time are over." The Rosenborg fans continued yelling at the top of their voices as Daniel Örlund prepared to take the goal kick. Their voices blended into a booming chorus that shook the stadium. They were obviously hoping for the game to end so that their team, Rosenborg, could get a small break to reorganize before extra time.

Be that as it may, the referee ignored the loud rants of the fans and let the game continue for one more minute. But still, neither team made any more attempts on the other's goal until the final whistle sounded after 97 minutes of intensive Europa League football. As a result, the game would be moving into the thirty minutes of extra time since the aggregate score was still a tie of 3:3 at the end of regular time.

Chapter 383 Extra Time There was only a five-minute break between the end of regular game time and the thirty-minute extra time. Since the time window was brief, the coaches and technical personnel of the two teams were pulling out all stops to reorganize their respective sides as quickly as possible.

On the side of Rosenborg, the medics and assistants concentrated on massaging the players while Coach Johansen voiced out his instructions at the pace of a machine gun.

"Guys," he said, glancing around. "You need to remain solid in defense during extra-time. Play as a team, don't rush and don't panic. Stay calm, and endure their attacks. And when an opportunity arises, counterattack and try to get that winning goal. Are you guys with me?"

"Yes, coach," the players replied.

Coach Johansen nodded. "I also noticed that Benfica's crosses hurt us quite a bit during the second half," he said. "The goal they scored was from a cross. And in the final minutes, they were about to convert yet another from another cross again. We can't allow those crosses to continue coming into our box during the thirty minutes of extra time."

The coach glanced around. "Wingers and wing-backs! It'll be your role to fall back quickly and block their crosses. You must seal off their crossing routes so that we can limit their attacking options. As long as we accomplish that, I can assure you that they will find it impossible to score another goal."

On the side of Benfica, Coach Jorge Jesus was also voicing out his final instructions to the Benfica players seated around him. He spoke loudly to emphasize his words and ensure his core message hit home.

"During the final minutes of the second half," he said, "you guys relaxed and allowed Zachary to score against us. I had repeatedly warned you before the game to stop him by any means possible if he made a threatening run through our midfield. But you guys were like pedestrians, watching him glide by without doing anything. And in the end, he scored that goal that really hurt us a lot."

"Guys!" He said while alternating his gaze between Ljubomir Fejsa and Enzo Pérez, Benfica's two central midfielders. "During the thirty minutes of extra time, you can't relax and allow him to do as he pleases. Midfielders! You have to tight mark Zachary and ensure that he has no breathing space for every moment of the game. Always stay alert, and do whatever is necessary to stop him from hurting us again. Clear?"

The two Benfica midfielders responded by nodding to indicate that they had gotten the message.

Coach Jorge Jesus nodded again and turned his gaze away from the two midfielders. "Lastly, stay calm, and play as a team. Don't panic while trying to create goal-scoring opportunities. Make sure that you watch out for their counterattacks, and don't let them catch us off guard when we're trying to score. That's all I have to say. So, let me wish you luck, and let's meet as the victors at the end of the night." The coach added before walking back to the bench.

The cheers around the stadium hit another thunderous zenith as the referee blew the whistle after the five-minute break. Extra time was finally underway, and Nicki Nielsen, Rosenborg's center-forward, kicked off the game by passing the ball back into his midfield. He then ran towards the other side of the pitch to take up his position on the striking line.

Zachary controlled the pass from Nicki right outside the center circle. Before any opponents could close him down, he pulled the ball back with his left foot and then kicked it toward Thomas Partey, Rosenborg's holding midfielder.

Thomas Partey was also quick while controlling the ball. He stopped it with a single touch and immediately passed it towards Takumi Minamino. The latter also controlled it well before squaring it to Zachary, who had just made a run into an unmarked pocket of the space within Benfica's half.

Zachary quickly shrugged off the two Benfica midfielders marking him as he reined in the ball. He raised his leg, seemingly as if he was just about to pass the ball. But the next moment, he turned around with the ball glued to his boot to execute a Marseille turn and break through the blockade of the two opponents in his way. And then, without losing a second, he lifted his foot, intending to take off and continue his run towards Benfica's box.

However, it was at that moment that he felt a firm tug on his jersey. He tried to shrug off the opponent's grip while continuing his run. But the opponent stubbornly held onto his shirt and didn't let him take another step with the ball.

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The referee blew the whistle and rushed to the scene. He gave a verbal warning to Enzo Pérez, the player who'd been holding Zachary's jersey before awarding Rosenborg a free kick.

Zachary sighed as he stood over the ball close to the edge of the center circle on Benfica's side of the pitch. It seemed that the opponents intended to play dirty and foul him repeatedly. So, he would probably not get another chance to run with the ball. The fact frustrated him, especially since he badly wanted to create an opportunity for Rosenborg to score before the end of the thirty-minute extra time.

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After a short while, the referee blew the whistle to motion for the free-kick, and the game continued. Over the next few minutes, Zachary tried a few more times to make runs through the middle, but the Benfica players continued fouling him repeatedly. Eventually, he became less productive on the offensive end and failed to create any goal-scoring chances for Rosenborg.

With the threat of Zachary neutralized, the Benfica players became bolder on the attack. They launched a series of offensives on Rosenborg's box as they searched for that winning goal that would take them to the finals of the Europa League.

Their creativity was commendable, and during the 20th minute of overtime, their efforts almost paid off when Enzo Pérez managed to single out Lima dos Santos, Benfica's center-forward, with a well-timed through-pass. The striker controlled the ball and skillfully skipped past Yerry Mina before stepping into Rosenborg's box.

At that moment, the hearts of most Rosenborg fans were in their throats as Lima dos Santos raised his leg and smacked the ball to send it on a curling trajectory towards the goal. But fortunately for the home supporters, the ball missed the target by mere centimeters before bouncing out of play.

After that missed opportunity on Benfica's side, the Rosenborg players adjusted accordingly and played a purely defensive game. They prevented Benfica from creating more chances on goal by relying on their ultra-defensive 4-5-1 formation.

The time flashed by, and eventually, the final whistle sounded to mark the end of the thirty minutes of overtime. But the aggregate score was still 3:3, indicating that neither Rosenborg nor Benfica had gotten the better of the other over the two legs of the Europa League semi-finals. Thus, the game would be heading into penalties to determine the team qualifying for the Europa League finals in Turin.

Chapter 384 Penalty Shootout Coach Johansen's heart raced with anxiety as he watched his players settle down around him on one side of the pitch. He was tense, and no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't seem to calm down. He understood that penalties depended a lot on the element of luck and

experience of the players. So, as a coach, there was not much he could do to improve his team's chances of winning the penalty shootout aside from organizing an appropriate order and the best line-up of his players to take the penalties.

"Okay, guys," he said, sweeping his gaze across his players. "Listen up. I commend you for the great work done during the thirty minutes of extra time. You played as a team and held one of the more experienced teams in Europe to a draw for more than 120 minutes of game time. However, our work is still far from done as we have a penalty shootout. We can't relax. We've got to remain calm, highly focused, and at the top of our game during the next few minutes. Are you guys with me?"

"Yes, coach," the players replied in a lackluster manner. The fatigue had already taken a toll on them. So, they were focused on hydrating themselves instead of the coach's words.

"Guys!" The coach roared after hearing his players' half-hearted response. "Are you guys with me?"

"Yes, coach," the players yelled back in response. That time around, their voices were loud and clear. They reverberated across the stadium filled with chaotic chatter and even caught the attention of the Benfica players on the other side of the pitch.

Coach Johansen smiled and nodded. "Now, that's the spirit of a team that wishes to win a ticket to the Europa League finals," he said. "I believe we're now on the same page. So, let's move on to the crucial issues at hand. I'll now read out the order of players that will take the penalties. Listen carefully."

The coach fished out a crumpled piece of paper from his pocket. Without further ado, he unfolded it before continuing. "The player to take our first penalty will be Zachary Bemba. Then, Nicki Nielsen will be the second, Takumi Minamino will be the third, Mikael Dorsin will be our fourth, and finally, Thomas Partey will be our fifth penalty-taker."

"If we fail to decide the winner of the penalty shootout after the first five penalties," the coach continued. "Then, Alexander Söderlund will take our sixth penalty. After that, it'll be Eric Bailly, Tore Reginiussen, Paul Kasongo, Yerry Mina, and finally, Daniel Örlund, in that order. Have you all remembered the order of taking the penalties?" The coach glanced around.

"Yes, coach," the players replied.

"Good," Coach Johansen said, smiling. We have been practicing penalties since we started playing in the knock-out stages of the Europa League. So, you guys are already experts at taking penalties. There is no need to panic. You only need to remain calm and bring out those skills while facing off against the keeper. Remember to choose where to place the ball before shooting, and don't go for anything fancy. As long as you do that, you'll convert your penalty easily. Are you with me?"

"Yes, coach," the players replied.

"Excellent," the coach said, glancing at his watch. "The five-minute break is almost over. So, it's time for you to head into the pitch and take the penalties. I wish you the best of luck, and let's meet at the end of the game when we're already the victors."

Zachary felt like he was walking on pins and needles as he marched along with the rest of his teammates toward the center circle. Even though he'd already played football on the professional stage for more than a year, he couldn't totally push out the pressure brought about by the penalty shootout.

He dreaded penalties since they greatly depended on luck and understood that even the best players in the world could miss them. Moreover, Rosenborg's Europa League dream was on the line — and that caused him to grow tenser as he approached the center circle.

"Guys," Daniel Örlund, the Rosenborg keeper, said a few seconds later when the players reached the center circle. "I wish you all the best of luck. Let's win this semi-final." He then shook hands and hugged his teammates before marching off towards the goal selected by the referee for the penalty shootout.

The proceedings moved forward quickly, and soon, the referee called upon Zachary to step forward and take the first penalty.

"Good luck, Zachary," Mikael Dorsin said, patting him on the shoulder. "Remember to stay calm, and everything else will be fine. We all believe in you."

"Thanks for the encouragement," Zachary replied with a smile. He shook hands with a few other teammates before walking towards the selected goal for the penalty shootout.

A wave of silence swept across the stadium as most fans waited anxiously for the result of the first face-off between Zachary, Rosenborg's young playmaker, and Artur Moraes, Benfica's experienced keeper.

However, Zachary ignored the abnormal situation in the stands. He activated the Dead-Ball Specialist Juju and slowly forced himself to focus only on the goal and the opposing keeper. The Juju worked its wonders, and his concentration transcended the realms of geniuses. And slowly, all the distracting thoughts faded from his mind as he approached the box with confident steps.

After entering the penalty area, he picked up the ball from the ground and placed it on the penalty spot. The referee gave him the go-ahead, and he took a few steps back from the ball while glancing briefly at the keeper's position. His incredible spatial awareness came into effect, and in anything but a flash, he assessed the situation between the posts.

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The referee's whistle sounded the next moment. Zachary immediately acted with haste and made an angled run towards the ball. He then took the last jump-step before smacking the ball and sending it towards the goal. His technique was incredible, and he sent the keeper diving the wrong way as the ball homed into the top right corner.

A soft smile lit up Zachary's face. He exhaled with relief as the cheers around the stadium rose to thunderous heights. He felt like he'd finally unloaded a heavy load off his shoulders since he had completed his task and converted Rosenborg's first penalty during the shootout. He waved to the enthusiastic home fans, causing them to cheer even more loudly before jogging back to the center circle.

Rosenborg BK 1 : SL Benfica 0

The large jumbotron in the stadium showed the current score from the penalty shootout as Rodrigo Moreno Machado stepped forward to take Benfica's penalty. The striker was surprisingly calm. Without losing composure, he sent Daniel Örlund the wrong way and converted Benfica's first penalty.

Rosenborg BK 1 : SL Benfica 1

The next player to step forward was Nicki Nielsen, and he also converted the penalty and put Rosenborg in the lead again. The score was then 2:1.

Lima dos Santos, Benfica's center-forward, stepped up next. He also remained composed and sent the keeper the wrong way to convert successfully. The score from the penalty shootout was then 2:2.

Then, it was Rosenborg's turn again, and Takumi Minamino converted successfully and reinforced Rosenborg's hopes for the finals. The score was then 3:2.

On the side of Benfica, André Almeida stepped forward and also converted. As a result, the score was then 3:3.

Mikael Dorsin, Rosenborg's left-back, was the next player in action. His technique was also good, and he converted with his left leg to score the fourth penalty. Rosenborg was again in the lead as the score was then 4:3.

Next, Enzo Pérez, one of Benfica's midfielders, also converted to equalize the score at 4:4. As a result, the teams were still neck and neck after four penalties.

The tension was in the air, and a wave of silence descended across the stadium as Thomas Partey, Rosenborg's young holding midfielder, stepped forward to take Rosenborg's fifth penalty.

After the referee's whistle sounded, Thomas Partey made an angled run towards the ball and unleashed a heavy shot towards the goal. However, Artur Moraes, Benfica's keeper, managed to dive the right way and punched the ball out of the play.

"Oh my God!"

Zachary felt a cold chill descend upon his entire being as he watched Benfica's keeper celebrating after saving Thomas Partey's penalty. His heart started racing, and beads of sweat rolled down his forehead. He couldn't help but bury his face in his hands as his heart descended into the abyss of desperation.

He was really anxious as Rosenborg was on the verge of losing the semi-final. If Daniel Örlund failed to save Benfica's following penalty, Benfica would win the game with five converted penalties. And then, Rosenborg would bow out of the Europa League that night when they were only a step away from the finals. The situation was really dire.

Chapter 385 Penalty Shootout Outcome "Artur Moraes has managed to save Thomas Partey's penalty," the voice of Kjell Roar, the commentator, resounded across the stadium. "His save has put Benfica in a really advantageous position in this penalty shootout. It's 4 out of 5 for Rosenborg and 4 out of 4 for team Benfica. If Benfica scores the next penalty, they will win one of the two tickets to the Europa League finals in Turin. And Luisão, Benfica's experienced captain, is the man who has stepped forward to take the fifth penalty for his team. Can he win it all? Can he convert and make it 5 out of 5 converted penalties for Benfica? The rare opportunity is in the hands of the captain..."

Kristin's countenance grew paler and paler as she listened to the commentator's rambling voice while also following the proceedings on the pitch. She was worried and tense since her team was at a disadvantage. But all she could do was pray and hope that the goalkeeper saved Benfica's following penalty. Otherwise, Rosenborg would be out of the Europa League that very night.

"It's Luisão against Daniel Örlund," the commentator's voice resounded. "It's now the moment for Benfica to win it all, and Luisão takes a few steps back from the ball. Luisão! Luisão takes the shot. Oh, my God! He hits the post. Luisão, the experienced Benfica captain, has missed the golden opportunity to win it all. The penalty shootout is back to square one. It's now 4 out of 5 for Rosenborg and 4 out of 5 for Benfica. Oh, my, my! What a match!"

Kristin's hopes had already soared to cloud nine as the commentator continued yelling in sync with the thunderous cheers of the crowd. A few seconds ago, she had been edgy and anxious, fearing that her team might have to bow out of the Europa League. But, it seemed that the goddess of luck was still in favor of her team, and in the end, Rosenborg had survived Benfica's fifth penalty.

"It's now time for penalty number six on the side of Rosenborg," the commentator yelled after a few seconds. "And the responsibility falls on Alexander Söderlund, one of Rosenborg's key forwards. Can he convert and put Rosenborg back in the driving seat? Alexander! He takes the shot. Oh my! He scores and puts Rosenborg back in front. It's now 5 out of 6 for Rosenborg and 4 out of 5 for Benfica."

"The pressure is back on Benfica as Ljubomir Fejsa steps forward to take Benfica's sixth penalty. If the holding midfielder fails to convert and score, Rosenborg will win the ticket to the finals. Fejsa! Fejsa! Great technique! He sends the keeper the wrong way and scores. He has managed to bring the proceedings back to square one. The pressure is back on Rosenborg's side."

"Tensions are running high in the stadium," the commentator continued. "The crowd within Lerkendal is holding its breath as Eric Bailly, Rosenborg's young center-back, prepares to take Rosenborg's seventh penalty. Can he propel Rosenborg into the driving seat again?"

Beads of sweat rolled down John Hansen's forehead as he watched Eric Bailly preparing to take the penalty. Although the part-time YouTuber had already won the bet of Rosenborg emerging victorious after the 90 minutes of regular playing time, he wasn't satisfied. He still wanted his team to win the penalty shootout and then cash in big on another bet of Rosenborg qualifying for the final.

"It's Eric Bailly against Artur Moraes," the commentator's voice resounded over the din in the stadium. "Eric Bailly! Eric! He takes the shot and sends the ball barely past Artur Moraes' outstretched fingertips. The young Ivorian has put Rosenborg back in the driving seat. It's now 6 out of 7 for Rosenborg and 5 out of 6 for Benfica."

"Benfica is hanging on the cliff as Ivan Cavaleiro steps forward to take the penalty. A tremendous responsibility falls upon the young man, who only turned nineteen a few months back. He has to score to keep Benfica's Europa League dream alive. If he fails to convert, Rosenborg will win the semi-final."

"The referee has given the go-ahead, and Ivan Cavaleiro makes the run toward the ball. He shoots. Oh my, God! Saved! Effort Saved! Rosenborg has won one of the two tickets to the Europa League finals. Daniel Örlund is the hero today. He dived the right way and punched the ball away from the goal. What an ending tonight!"

At that moment, the cheers around Lerkendal hit a thunderous crescendo. The Rosenborg fans, including John Hansen, jumped high and yelled at the top of their voices. Their team had overcome a tricky opponent and qualified for the Europa League finals for the first time in history. Thus, they were on cloud nine and could hardly rein in their emotions.

On the pitch, Zachary joined the rest of his teammates to celebrate Rosenborg's victory. He had already removed his shirt and thrown it to the Rosenborg supporters. So he ran around the pitch bare-chested while yelling at the top of his voice.

"We're in the finals, Zachary!" Coach Johansen yelled as he intercepted him and gave him a bear hug. "Your goal during the 91st minute was incredible, and it was the deciding factor for this semi-final. So, thanks a lot for rescuing the team again."

"There's no need for thanks as that is my duty," Zachary replied with a grin. "Moreover, I think that Daniel Örlund is our hero tonight. If he had not saved that penalty, we would have been in deep shit. He won the semi-final for us."

"That's also true," the coach agreed. "But we can't count out your efforts. Throughout the entire semi-final, you kept most of their midfielders occupied. And that is one of the crucial factors that aided us in besting the tricky Benfica side over the two legs. So, you should feel proud of yourself since your efforts have helped propel us to the finals."

The proceedings moved forward quickly as the Rosenborg players and technical staff celebrated their hard-fought victory. They could hardly contain their excitement and continued singing victory chants even after returning to the dressing room.

But just as they were in the middle of the celebrations, a loud knock resounded in the dressing room. The next moment, the players and staff turned silent as they noticed one of the UEFA officials stepping into the room.

"Coach Johansen," the official called out. "It's time for you to fulfill your press duties. Please head to the press room with two of your players immediately. Thank you." Without waiting for a response, the official turned around and stepped out of the room.

"Guys!" Coach Johansen yelled after a few seconds. "I congratulate you all upon winning the semi-finals. But I can't continue celebrating with you as duty calls. Zachary! Can you come to the press conference with me?"

"Coach," Zachary replied after chugging down some water. "I'm requesting that you let me dodge the press conference today. I can't always be the only one going to press conferences on the team."

Coach Johansen smiled and nodded. "I understand," he said, turning his gaze away. "Zachary has reminded me of an important point. So, we'll start taking turns for the press conferences. Daniel! Nicki! The duty falls upon your shoulders tonight. So, let's head to the press room together."

"Aye, coach," the two players replied almost in unison.

The journalists were already in their seats when Coach Johansen's party of three arrived in the press room. Without wasting much time, they started the interview session.

"I'm Jordan Porter from ESPN," a brown-haired man in the front row introduced himself. "Coach Johansen! Your team has qualified for the Europa League finals for the first time in history. How do you feel as a coach who has made that happen?"

"Words cannot describe the excitement I'm feeling," Coach Johansen replied. "Benfica gave us a hard time during the semi-final, but in the end, we overcame them to qualify for the finals. So, I'm both relieved and delighted that we have overcome this tough hurdle."

"Walter cooper from BBC," another journalist said after standing up. "My question is to Nicki Nielsen. Nicki! You connected well with Zachary's pass to score Rosenborg's first goal during the 17th minute. Can you tell us the trick to the incredible chemistry between you and Zachary? How's it that he managed to find you in that crowd of players before the box?"

"You would have to ask Zachary that question to get an answer," Nicki replied with a smile. "And the trick to our chemistry is quite simple. I only need to make a good run toward the opponent's goal when Zachary receives the ball. As long as I time my run well, Zachary will always find me with an excellent pass. His vision at the crucial moments of the game is that scary."

"His goal for the team was also incredible," the same reporter remarked. "He literally forced his way through Benfica's packed midfield and defense before scoring Rosenborg's second goal tonight."

"Yes, the goal was really incredible," Nicki agreed. "His footwork, vision, and zeal were all out of this world at that moment. He overcame all obstacles imposed on him by the opponents before burying the ball into the back of the net. In my book, that goal should be voted the goal of the season."

Most of the reporters nodded in response. They seemed to agree with Nicki on that point.

"I'm Shereen Graham from the Mirror," a lady reporter stood up next. "My question is to Daniel Örlund. Daniel! You saved that seventh penalty and ensured that your team qualified for the finals. How do you feel?"

"Great, I guess," Daniel replied in a flat voice.

The reporter smiled and turned towards Coach Johansen. "The other semi-final has just concluded," she said. "Sevilla is the team that has qualified for the final after beating Valencia based on the away-goal rule. Coach Johansen! How do you feel about your opponents in the Europa League final? Do you think you can overcome them in Turin on the 14th of May?"

"Sevilla is a great team with incredible players for sure," Coach Johansen replied. "They are more powerful than us on paper, and I believe they will come at us with everything they got during the final. But we still have a great chance of overpowering them if we prepare well and play at our best. I have to remind you that we're not satisfied with only reaching the final of the Europa League. We also wish to

win the Europa League trophy this season. So, we'll do everything possible to ensure the trophy comes to Trondheim after the final."

Chapter 386 Reflections and Deliberations Even after spending a large part of the night partying with teammates, Zachary still managed to wake up at 9:00 AM. The hard-fought victory over Benfica had caused his spirits to soar into the skies, and he was in a hyper mood as he went through his morning yoga routine in the living room of his apartment.

As he performed the various yoga poses, scenes of the previous night went through his mind. First, he remembered how he'd provided an assist that enabled Nicki to score Rosenborg's first goal. Then, he recalled how Benfica had equalized the game during the 88th minute. At that moment, he had felt as if the entire world was crumbling around him since Rosenborg was behind Benfica going by the aggregate score.

But due to sheer luck, he'd entered an uncanny mental state, totally different from the zone mental state. The state of mind that seemed to rely purely on instincts had helped him perform the impossible and dribble through the opposition's packed midfield and defense before scoring Rosenborg's second goal on the night. And that goal was what helped Rosenborg extend the game into extra time and eventually to the penalty shootout, where they overcame Benfica.

"I wonder if I can enter that mental state again!"

Zachary could feel his blood boiling with anticipation as he recalled how he overcame the opposing midfielders and defenders before scoring the goal. The football skills he'd mastered seemed to have totally merged with his entire being, and he'd performed them without thinking. He had even gained an incredible connection with the ball, and performing moves like the elastico dribble had been like the reflexive action of blinking. All in all, football had never been easy like at that juncture.

But later on, during extra time, when he'd tried to re-enact the state of mind, he'd failed again and again. No matter how hard he'd tried, he hadn't managed to reach the level of playing just by relying on instincts during the crucial moments. So, he'd pushed the matter to the back of his mind until that morning, when he was going through his post-match yoga routine.

"System," he called out after completing the yoga routine. "Can you tell me about the state of mind I was in yesterday? Why could I perform beyond my best before I scored that second goal?"

"The user's will to win the game was incredible yesterday," the system AI replied. "The will to win the game forced the user to transcend his limits in the mental aspect and perform like never before. If the user would like to experience and explore that spectacular state again, the user should focus on increasing his mental aspects of the game. A good start would be winning the Europa League best player accolade and obtaining a corresponding reward of the S-grade mental conditioning elixir from the system."

"S-grade mental conditioning elixir!" Zachary mumbled as the details of the 2013/14 Europa League Serial Challenge mission coursed through his mind. He understood that he had to become the best player in that Europa League tournament to gain the elixir reward from the system. But there was one issue that still confused him. So, he decided to ask the system AI.

"System," he called out. "As far as I know, there is no best player award in the Europa League. So, how will the system judge whether I'm the best player or not?"

"The system can collect the performance data of all players in the Europa League," the AI replied. "By combining the various statistics (such as goals scored, successful dribble attempts, aerial duels won, number of assists, etcetera), the system can weight them against your team's overall performance in the Europa League. Then, it'll be easy to determine whether you're the best performing player in the tournament."

"I see," Zachary mumbled, smiling. Since the system had its own way of determining his rank on the Europa League best player list, he didn't have to wait for the shortlist for the UEFA Men's Player of the Year Award scheduled to be released in August. If all went well, he might be able to immediately acquire two S-grade elixirs and a hefty sum of Juju points as rewards from the system after playing the finals in Turin two weeks later. Those rewards would help him improve his football skills and abilities to unprecedented levels. He would then turn into a monster on the pitch before he completed his transfer to a new club. But first, he had to help his team win the finals.

"One step at a time," Zachary reminded himself as he dried his face with a clean towel. "Before playing the finals, I can't get ahead of myself. I have to perform at my best against Sevilla and ensure that my team wins without going through penalties again."

Zachary's experience during the semi-final against Benfica had made him dread and fear penalties more than before. He had felt useless the previous night when he'd noticed that he had no control over the result of the penalty shootout. It was mostly through luck that his team managed to win.

Winning that way irked Zachary to some extent. So, he had secretly vowed to do his utmost to win future games during the 90 minutes of regular game time. As long as he helped his team score many goals, he wouldn't have to face the mental torture resulting from the penalty shootout.

"Bzzt Bzzzt! Bzzt Bzzzt!"

Zachary's phone vibrated and attracted his attention just as he was about to take his post-yoga routine shower. He quickly turned around and scooped it up from a nearby table before glancing at the screen. He couldn't help but smile slightly after noticing that the call was from Emily, his agent.

"Good morning, Emily," he spoke into the phone after pressing the accept button. "You're calling so early! Do you have any good news for me?"

"Good morning, Zachary!" Emily's said from the other end of the line. Her British accent colored her words, making her voice as vibrant as ever. "You have guessed right. I do have some good news. Can we meet a.s.a.p.?"

"That's okay with me," Zachary replied after glancing at the wall clock on the opposite wall. "We can meet thirty minutes later, at around 11:00 AM. Where should we meet?"

"If it's not a bother, we should meet at your place," Emily replied. "This is a measure against some journalists who have been tailing me over the past few weeks. I don't want to give them an opportunity to glean some information from what I'm about to discuss with you. The best way to ensure secrecy is to hold our meeting somewhere private, like in your apartment or a hotel room."

"I see," Zachary said. "Then, just come over to my apartment. I'm alone here. So, you don't have to worry about the contents of our conversation leaking out."

"Great," Emily replied. "I'll be there in thirty minutes. Should I bring you some breakfast?"

Zachary thought for a moment and agreed. "A coffee will do. Thanks, and see you in thirty minutes."

Chapter 387 First Bids from Interested Clubs After ending the call, Zachary operated with all the haste he could muster. He quickly organized his living room before cleaning up and dressing up. He then settled in his living room to wait for Emily.

As usual, he didn't have to wait long, and Emily knocked on his door at exactly 11:00 AM to the digit.

"Welcome," Zachary said after opening the door. "Let me take that off your hands." He stretched out his hands and motioned for her to hand over the coffee cup holder to him.

"Thank you." Emily beamed as she handed him the small cup holder with four coffee cups. She had donned a light blue lady's business suit that matched the color of her eyes. Her dressing style brought out her lithe figure, and she just looked like a successful young and beautiful woman on the cover of a world-famous business magazine.

"Come in," Zachary said before leading the way into the apartment. Emily followed him, and they quickly settled down on two opposite sofas in the living room. The morning sun rays, passing through the wide window, lit up their faces as they started enjoying their coffee.

"So, what good news do you have for me this time?" Zachary broke the silence with a question after a few more seconds.

The corners of Emily's lips curled up into a gorgeous smile. "First of all," she said, "Let me start by congratulating you upon qualifying for the finals of the Europa League. Your second goal for Rosenborg yesterday was incredible, and it has eased my work to a great extent. You're the best client a football agent can ever wish for."

"Thank you," Zachary said, grinning. "And, of course, you're one of the best agents a footballer can wish for in the world. I hope greats like Messi and Ronaldo won't steal you from me in the future when you make it big."

Emily chuckled. "Jokes aside," she said. "We've made progress with two clubs chasing after your signature. The first one is Tottenham Hotspur. Today morning, the club representatives have confirmed that they will table a bid of 36.5 million Euros + add-ons to Rosenborg for your signature. The add-ons, including player exchanges, loaning agreements, plus other future payments, total about 20 million Euros. So, they have valued you at 56.5 million Euros. If you agree to the move, you would be their most expensive signing in history."

Zachary nodded as he tried his best to calm his racing heart. "What about the salary? How much are they offering?"

Emily smiled. "I was just getting to that," she said. "The Tottenham representatives have promised that the club will pay you 85,000 British Pounds per week if you sign with them. That's an approximate 104,000 Euros in gross weekly income, which would make you the third-highest paid player on their payroll. Only Roberto Soldado and Emmanuel Adebayor would be ahead of you on their pay sheet. As a bonus, they would start paying my fees as your agent annually, which is 10% of your would-be income. I'm sure I can force them to increase your weekly wage if I continue bargaining and playing my cards right over the next few weeks. What do you think?"

"The deal is great," Zachary said while breathing out to calm his agitated emotions. He couldn't believe that one of the big clubs in England had tabled such an amount for his services. It was a dream come true, as far as he was concerned. "First, tell me about the bid from the second club. I'll give you my view after hearing about their offer."

Emily nodded. "The second club that is already in talks with Rosenborg management over your signature is Juventus. The Juventus representatives have already tabled a bid of 58 million Euros + add-ons of about 6 million Euros. That means they've already offered 64 million Euros as their first bid for your signature. So, if you're not against going to the Italian side, the Rosenborg top management will be doing their best to sell you to the Italians at around that fee."

"What about the weekly wages?" Zachary inquired. The buying fee didn't mean much to him as it would mostly be going to his current club. What mattered to him was the weekly wages the club would offer if he signed with them.

"Juventus has promised to pay you a gross weekly wage of 115,000 Euros if you sign with them," Emily answered. "That would allow you to earn about 5.5 million Euros per year, making you their second-highest-paid player next season. From what I've heard, only Paul Pogba would be above you on the pay sheet with a weekly income of 125,000 Euros. The club would also pay my fees as your agent, and their promise is 10% of your wage paid annually. Their offers top those of Tottenham in all aspects. But still, it will be up to you as a player to influence the Rosenborg management and force them to sell you where you want to go."

"I see," Zachary said, leaning back into his seat. He was confused for a moment as all offers were tempting. The salary was something out of his dreams, and he would get to play for top clubs with top players. But what was he to choose? Zachary glanced at Emily. "What's your opinion?"

Emily smiled. "From what I have learned, both clubs are very interested in you as a player. That's why they're both offering you a high income. The only difference between the two clubs is that you might find it hard to adapt quickly to the atmosphere in Turin as opposed to that in London. For instance, you'll have to learn Italian and fight for a place on the squad against world-class players like Pirlo, Arturo Vidal, and Pogba. But, I guess that that can also be a growing experience if you embrace it well."

"On the other hand," Emily continued, "If you choose Tottenham, you can adapt fast since you speak good English. You'll even cement your place in their squad immediately due to your incredible skills, which I believe outmatch those of their current midfielders."

"But there would also be one disadvantage of the move to Tottenham. That is: you won't be able to win trophies easily unless the club buys more players of your caliber. Remember: the English Premier League isn't like the Norwegian League. Defenders and midfielders are very physical, and you can't carry the team on your shoulders when you're only two or three players on the team with class. A team would even need great luck or a balanced squad to have a chance of winning any trophy. So, if Tottenham doesn't buy more players, you might not win another trophy for years."

"I understand," Zachary said, sinking into a moment of contemplation. He wasn't worried that Tottenham would lack players of class. Based on the knowledge from his previous life, he understood that young talents like Harry Kane, Christian Eriksen, Erik Lamela, Heung-min Son, Eric Dier, and Kyle Walker, among others, were about to come into the picture. Under the guidance of Mauricio Pochettino, the soon-to-be Tottenham head coach, they would play great football for several seasons. They would reach the finals of several cups, including the UEFA Champions League final. But in the end, they would lose all of them and remain trophyless over the following decade.

Be that as it may, Zachary was sure they were just an unfortunate team in their endeavors. They only needed a slight push to change their trajectory in history, and they would do wonders in his new life. And Zachary believed he could be that push that altered their fate as a club.

"Keep pushing for the deal with Tottenham," Zachary said after contemplating. "Try your best to push for an increase in our proposed wages over the next few weeks. But don't agree to anything until after I have played the Europa League final."

"I get you," Emily said, nodding. "What about Juventus? Should I shrug off their offers, like what I have been doing with other clubs?"

"Don't do that," Zachary said, shaking his head. "As you already said, they are also keen on signing me. So, let's maintain a wait-and-see attitude until after the final. At the moment, I obviously still prefer Tottenham because it'll be easy for me to adapt to life in London. But if Juventus comes up with a hard-to-refuse offer, for instance, a large signing bonus and a similarly mouth-watering weekly income, then I'll consider them too. Honestly, I'm still a bit undecided on where to go."

"I understand." Emily chuckled. "You need time to process all the information I have just given you. But I'm sure you'll make the right choice after thinking things through. Just take your time since there's currently no pressure to make an immediate decision on our side. As for the offers from the other clubs, like Paris Saint-Germain and Manchester United, I shrugged them off after realizing that you weren't interested. Is that okay?"

"That's for the best," Zachary replied. "It's okay to focus on only Tottenham and Juventus for the moment. Transfer deals aside, how far with my grandma's Schengen identity card?"

"The identity card will be ready in a week's time," Emily replied. "How's your grandma, by the way? I have been busy with transfer deals. I haven't managed to check on her during the past two weeks."

"She's doing okay," Zachary replied. "But three days ago, the doctors informed me they would extend her stay in the hospital's rehabilitation center for roughly fifteen more days. They intend to conduct a few more tests to determine whether she has completely recovered before discharging her. So, that's when I'll require the identity card to transfer her to Norway."

"The ID will be ready," Emily said. "And the timing is just perfect since you'll just have finished playing the finals. You can concentrate on helping your grandma settle down without too many worries."

"I also like the timing," Zachary agreed. "Let's hope the final tests go okay. I'll only feel at ease after the doctors have assured me that she has totally recovered."

Chapter 388 Media Speculation Speculation about Zachary's almost-imminent transfer out of Rosenborg appeared in the news over the following few days. Some rumors were very far-fetched and reported that he might be heading to famous clubs like Chelsea, AC Milan, Real Madrid, or Barcelona. And probably due to his free-kick technique, others claimed that he was a fan of David Beckham, and he might go to Manchester United to follow in the footsteps of his idol. The gossip spread over the internet like a forest fire in summer.

However, all those rumors didn't affect Zachary in the slightest. He ignored the media attention and focused solely on improving himself through serious training. He couldn't afford to waste time thinking about his potential transfer, especially since he had to prepare for the Europa League final, scheduled to be played in Turin on May 14th, roughly two weeks from then.

Aside from training alone to hone his skills, Zachary joined the team training sessions. The team training was always intense, but none of his teammates raised any complaints. They were all hyped up since they wished to prepare themselves adequately for the Europa League final. They sometimes even put in a few extra hours of exhaustive workouts after the official training sessions. Their commitment was truly commendable.

Due to the intense schedule, the days seemed to pass by quickly, and soon, it was Sunday, May 4th. It was finally the day when the Rosenborg players would play their first game in that year's Norwegian Cup. And that game was against Orkla FK, a team from the Norwegian 3rd division football league.

Even though the game was at an away ground, at Orkla FK's home stadium, Zachary and his teammates effortlessly vanquished the weaker side. During the 13th minute, Zachary picked out Paul Kasongo with a defense-splitting through-pass. The latter easily connected with the pin-point pass before skipping past a defender and scoring Rosenborg's first goal for the evening.

Eight minutes later, during the 21st minute, Zachary worked his magic again. He burst through the middle of the pitch like a Tsunami, leaving opposing midfielders and opponents powerless. When the shooting angle opened up, he struck from outside the 18-yard-box to score Rosenborg's second goal.

But that wasn't the end of his spectacular display. Six minutes later, during the 27th minute, he found the mark again by relying on a free-kick positioned a few yards away from the box. He curled the ball over the defensive wall and into the back of the net to score Rosenborg's third goal for the evening.

The proceedings moved forward, and the Troll Kids continued pressurizing the opponents. However, they didn't manage to score the fourth goal until much later in the second half, during the 78th minute.

When everyone in the stadium began to assume that there weren't any more goals in the game, Takumi Minamino struck. He connected with Thomas Partey's long-range pass just outside the box on the left flank and unleashed a missile of a shot towards the goal. His effort was on point and curled past the keeper's outstretched fingertips before homing into the top right corner. The score was then 4:0 in favor of Rosenborg.

Takumi's goal seemed to have opened the floodgates again, and the Rosenborg players soon made it rain goals in Orkla FK's home ground. During the 83rd minute, Zachary scored Rosenborg's 5th and his 3rd for the day to complete his first domestic hattrick that year. Alexander Söderlund netted Rosenborg's 6th goal three minutes later, during the 86th minute. And finally, Tore Reginiussen, Rosenborg's captain, closed off the scoring frenzy by netting the 7th goal during the 91st minute.

It was the first time that season that all Rosenborg's first-team players had played in a domestic league match. They hadn't disappointed and had managed to overwhelm the much weaker Orkla FK by a score of 7:0. Due to the spectacular performance, Coach Johansen was grinning from ear to ear during the post-match press conference.

"Coach Johansen," one of the journalists in the press room called out. "Congratulations upon winning your first Norwegian Cup game this year. Your players, especially Zachary, Takumi, and Thomas Partey, were phenomenal. They performed well and ensured that your team beat Orkla FK 7:0. But what worries me and the rest of the Rosenborg fans is that you didn't rest any of your first-team players today. As we all know, the Europa League finals are on May 14th. That is only ten days from now. Aren't you worried about wearing out the players if you play them during every domestic game? Aren't you concerned that they'll become fatigued and underperform during the finals?"

"Thank you for the question," Coach Johansen said, smiling. "I decided to field the players today for rhythm reasons. If the players spend many days without playing competitive football, they'll lose their rhythm and get rusty. So, I have to give them several match-playing opportunities before the final. To them, the Norwegian Cup match was like a warm-up — to keep them in shape for the finals against Sevilla."

The journalist who'd posed the query chuckled before asking another question. "Are you implying that you might utilize your first-team squad during the upcoming Tippeligaen game against Sogndal? Or will you choose to rest them and keep them fresh for the finals?"

"That, I can't answer right now," Coach Johansen replied. "I'll observe the players during training over the next few days and analyze and understand their conditions. Then, I'll decide whether to field them on the day before the game against Sogndal IL."

Another journalist stood up. "Coach Johansen," he said. "My question is about Zachary Bemba. Once again, he was spectacular today, and he managed to score a hatrick. But many Rosenborg fans are worried about the speculation surrounding Zachary. As you should know, many news outlets and transfer experts have already reported that Rosenborg is close to selling Zachary to Tottenham, Manchester United, or Juventus. Can you tell us whether these rumors are true?"

Coach Johansen sighed and shook his head. "As you said, those are just rumors. The entire team's focus is on the Europa League finals at the moment. So, we're not going to negotiate any transfer deals with other clubs until after May 14th. That implies that Zachary is still our player until we communicate otherwise."

"Coach Johansen!" Another journalist called out. "Can you tell us whether any clubs have reached out to Rosenborg to buy Zachary?"

"No comment," Coach Johansen said. "As I already said, the entire team is busy preparing for the Europa League finals. As a coach, I also have to do my part and ensure that my players are ready for the final. So, I don't have any time to move around, checking whether any other clubs are about to make bids to acquire my players."

After the press conference, Coach Johansen returned to his office within Lerkendal. The endless questions about Zachary's potential transfer out of Rosenborg had fouled his jolly mood. He couldn't even smile even though his team had just thrashed Orkla FK by seven goals to nil.

"Damn it!"

Coach Johansen cursed out loud as he settled into his office chair. He really felt helpless since Zachary was about to leave the club.

The previous day, both Tottenham and Juventus had increased their bids for Zachary. Tottenham had tabled 42 million + add-ons of about 20 million, while Juventus had offered a whopping 70 million Euros to outbid them.

The two offers had excited the members of Rosenborg's board, and they were already pushing for the club to sell Zachary to the highest bidder. So, if nothing unexpected happened, Zachary would leave Rosenborg during the upcoming transfer window.

But that wasn't what vexed Coach Johansen the most. He was incensed by the rest of the teams trying to raid his other players. Big clubs like Valencia, Lyon, Benfica, Arsenal, Manchester United, and Chelsea, among others, had already tabled bids for his other players like Thomas Partey, Eric Bailly, Yerry Mina, Takumi Minamino, Nicki Nielsen, and Paul Kasongo. And what upset him even more was the Rosenborg board leaning towards selling all those players to the highest bidders. That was simply unacceptable.

"What to do?"

Coach Johansen breathed out deeply and leaned back into his seat. He'd long expected Zachary to leave the club due to his extraordinary skills and talent. So, Coach Johansen could accept the board members' decision to sell him to the highest bidder as soon as possible. But he couldn't bear losing his other players, like Thomas Partey, Eric Bailly, and Takumi Minamino, especially since he'd just signed them.

"Let's focus on winning the finals first," Coach Johansen decided. "Maybe, the players will feel a stronger sense of belonging to the club if they win the Europa League with Rosenborg. Then, it'll be hard for those money-grubbers to sell the players off if they wish to stay at the club. That could be a solution."

Coach Johansen's eyes glinted with resolve. He soon pushed the distracting thoughts to the back of his mind and opened his laptop. Before long, he started watching one of Sevilla's past games while taking notes. The game was boring since Sevilla was playing a defensive game against Valencia. But the coach remained focused and watched every minute of the proceedings. He couldn't relax since he wished to understand the opponent's style of play and weaknesses before playing them in the Europa League final.

Chapter 389 Prelude to the Europa League Final Four days later, on a rainy Thursday evening, the Troll Kids played their domestic season's sixth Tippeligaen game against Sogndal IL at an away ground. For that game, Coach Johansen exercised caution. He benched most of his star players, including Zachary, Takumi Minamino, Thomas Partey, Nicki Nielsen, Yerry Mina, Mikael Dorsin, and Eric Bailly. His intent was to let them rest and save their energy for the finals against Sevilla the following Thursday.

But even without the star players, Rosenborg still showcased class and skill on the pitch. The second-stringers played as if their lives were on the line and dominated proceedings from the first minute. By relying on short and precise passes, they hoarded most of the ball possession and sustained tremendous pressure on Sogndal. And as expected, their efforts soon bore fruit, and they created their first goal-scoring opportunity during the 27th minute.

Karl Toko Ekambi burst through the wing like a bullet train on the rails before unleashing a curling lofted pass towards the area. His cross was spot on, and it managed to descend towards the position where Riku Riski, Rosenborg's right forward for the day, was lurking. The latter wasted no time leaping high to beat the opposing center-back. He effortlessly planted a header into the top right corner to score Rosenborg's 1st goal for the evening.

After the goal celebrations, the game continued. The Rosenborg players didn't let up the pressure and continued mounting relentless waves of attacks on Sogndal's defense. They combined their Tiki-taka style with wing play tactics to render the opponents helpless. But even then, they didn't manage to score until much later in the second half, during the 79th minute.

Tobias Mikkelsen, Rosenborg's right-winger who had just returned from injury, tore through Sogndal's defense like there was no tomorrow. He made an incredible mazy run from the wing before shooting from the edge of the box to score Rosenborg's second goal for the day.

After that, the Rosenborg players employed defensive tactics to weather the pressure of the final 10 minutes of the game. They remained solid at the back and ensured that the Sogndal attackers didn't create any opportunities at goal. Their efforts paid off, and in the end, they beat Sogndal away from home with a score of 2:0.

The win extended Rosenborg's domestic league unbeaten run in the new season to six games. As a result, the Troll Kids had again cemented their position at the top of the Tippeligaen table. They were the only team that had accumulated 18 points from 6 games. On the other hand, the second-placed Molde had only won 5 out of its six opening games to amass 15 points, while the third-placed Strømsgodset had only accumulated 14 points from the same number of games.

For sure, Rosenborg was already dominating the Norwegian League very early on in the season. And for that reason, the television pundits for the game sang high praises for the entire Rosenborg team during the post-match analysis session.

"I think we have been giving less credit to Rosenborg as a team," Roar Strand, one of the pundits, remarked. "We often think that only Zachary carries them through matches by scoring many incredible goals. But, let me remind you all that we can't be more wrong. The rest of the Rosenborg players are also doing wonders on the team. Take a look at Tobias Mikkelsen and Karl Toko Ekambi, for instance. In today's game, without Zachary, they were still spectacular. They played around with the Sogndal defenders and beat them repeatedly during the game. One provided the assist that resulted in the first goal, while the other scored the second. They are surely among some of the often-underrated Rosenborg players."

"You're right," Steffen Iversen, the second pundit, chimed in. "It's true that Zachary always outshines the rest of his teammates whenever he is present on the pitch. But without Zachary, I believe that Rosenborg would be a totally different team. Without him, they might not have won the domestic double last season, and they would definitely not have reached the Europa League finals. You have to understand that Zachary's presence on the team boosts the morale of his teammates. With him around, the players will do their utmost to try to match his level — and in the end; they'll put up incredible performances, like what we saw from Karl Toko Ekambi and Tobias today."

"That's a good point," Kjell Roar, the commentator, remarked. "But back to the game. Rosenborg's win has taken them to a six-match unbeaten run in the domestic league this year. Do you guys think Rosenborg can maintain this form until the end of the season? Can they win another domestic double?"

"That's a difficult question to answer before the transfer window," Steffen Iversen said. "If Rosenborg can retain most of the players, including Takumi Minamino, Eric Bailly, Thomas Partey, etcetera, then they will remain the favorites to win the league and the Norwegian Cup this year. However, if they sell off all their star players during the summer transfer window, they might end the year without any trophy."

"Even if they sell off the rest and keep only Zachary, they can still continue winning," Roar Strand chimed in with a chuckle. "But the question is: Can they convince Zachary to stay? There's a 50 million buy-out clause in his contract, and if Rosenborg tries to block his move to a bigger club, he might trigger it. And that would lower Zachary's selling price by a couple of a dozen million."

"I don't think anyone at Rosenborg should block Zachary from moving to a bigger club," Steffen Iversen remarked. "He has already done a lot for Rosenborg in his one year in Trondheim. Zachary

helped Rosenborg win a double last year. This year, he has single-handedly pushed them through the knock-out stages of the Europa League, and now, they are in their first-ever Europa League finals. What else could Rosenborg want from him? They should consider his future and let him join a bigger club of his own liking. They should even give him a hero send-off when he's leaving during the upcoming transfer window."

"It's too early to talk about a hero send-off," Kjell Roar chimed in. "Zachary still has to play the Europa League finals six days later, on May 14th. If he can help Rosenborg win their first-ever European title, he'll go down in history books. The Rosenborg fans will idolize him, and if he wants to leave the club, they will send him off like a hero. But if Rosenborg loses the final against Sevilla, I can't predict the fan base's reaction. The supporters might even label him a 'Judas Iscariot' for leaving the team in dire straits."

"That's harsh," Roar Strand said. "But you're right. Winning can bring the best out of the fans. On the other hand, losing can bring the worst out of the fans. So, let's wait and see what will happen in the finals."

After the game against Sogndal, the Rosenborg players took a one-day break before recommencing training. They spent the next four days doing their utmost to prepare for the Europa League finals.

Early in the morning, they would undergo fitness conditioning drills in the gym under the supervision of the coaches. Later in the morning, they would head to the training ground to go through the passing, positioning, and other team drills. They would then have lunch before returning to the training ground to continue the team drills. And finally, they would end their day with a team meeting in the tactics room, where the coaches would go over the possible game plans for the final against Sevilla.

Day in, day out, all the players worked harder than ever. The hours of practice quickly turned into days, and soon it was May 13th. It was finally the eve of the much-anticipated Europa League final battle between Sevilla and Rosenborg.

On that day, at 8:00 AM, Coach Johansen called the players into the tactics room at Lerkendal for another pre-match tactics meeting. He quickly gave a short analysis of Sevilla's weaknesses and usual style of play before going over the game plan for the umpteenth time that week.

Thirty minutes later, he rounded up his short speech about the tactics and immediately delved into naming the squad that would be heading to Turin to play in the Europa League finals the following day.

"These are the players on our starting line-up," he said, glancing around. "Daniel Örlund will be in goal against Sevilla tomorrow. Then, the four players - Mikael Dorsin, Tore Reginiussen, Yerry Mina, and Eric Bailly will be in defense. In our midfield, Thomas Partey, Takumi Minamino, and Zachary Bamba will be the players who hold the reins. And finally, on striking, we'll utilize Tobias Mikkelsen on the right flank, Alexander Söderlund on the left, and Nicki Nielsen as the center-forward. That is it for the players on the starting line-up."

"Moving on," the coach continued. "On the bench, we'll have the following players. Lund Hansen, William Troost-Ekong, Cristian Gamboa, Ole Selnæs, Mike Jensen, Karl Toko Ekambi, and Paul Kasongo. That's it for the squad heading to Turin for the finals. For those who didn't make the cut, don't lose heart. Keep working hard, and you'll surely get an opportunity to play for Rosenborg in the near future."

"For those on the squad, head back home and prepare. We'll be taking the bus to the airport at 11:00 AM. Our intent is to arrive in Turin by 6:00 PM today evening. Do you guys copy?"

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

"Good." The coach nodded and glanced at his watch. "Let's meet in the parking lot in two hours. Please be on time."

Chapter 390 To the Juventus Stadium in Turin I Later that morning, the Rosenborg players and technical staff boarded a KLM Airlines flight and headed to Turin. Their journey was without any unexpected incidents, and their plane touched down on the runway of the Turin International Airport five and half hours later.

The players and staff quickly went through the airport procedures before picking up their luggage and heading toward the airport's exit. Under the guidance of a UEFA official and a few dedicated airport staff, they managed to avoid all the fanfare and media attention. And after only a few minutes, they stepped out of the airport.

By then, only twenty minutes remained to six o'clock, and the sun was about to sink below the horizon in the western skies of Turin. So, the players and coaches didn't waste time boarding the arranged team bus, especially since they desired to rest after a long day of traveling.

After everyone had taken their seats on the bus, the driver skillfully pulled out of the airport's parking lot. Before long, he rounded a corner and joined a busy highway in Turin.

The traffic was surprisingly heavy that evening, and the journey took longer than expected. But finally, after fifty minutes of driving, the driver rounded a corner again and pulled up in front of the Grand Hotel Sitea, located in the heart of Risorgimento Turin.

The Rosenborg players and technical staff quickly picked up their luggage and checked into the hotel. They ate dinner about an hour later and attended a team meeting afterward. Then, when the clock hand was just about to point to the nine o'clock mark, the coaches ended the gathering and sent the players back to their rooms to rest.

The following morning, the players woke up at around eight o'clock. They ate breakfast with the coaches before heading to the gym to undergo a light conditioning routine. They completed the fitness training about an hour later and returned to their rooms with the intent to spend the rest of the time before the game resting.

Over the past five days, Coach Johansen had already instilled the game plan for the Europa League final into the players' minds. He had already gone over all the potential tactics and emphasized the roles of each player countless times. So, he left them to their own devices and let them rest for the entire day.

Zachary, on his part, spent the whole day in his room, playing a brick game on his phone. He'd already pushed all the thoughts about the Europa League final to the back of his mind. So, for hours, he solely focused on shooting down the digital bricks on his phone screen.

The android game was relaxing, and surprisingly, the hours passed by quickly. Lunchtime soon arrived, and Zachary took a small break to eat a light meal before returning to his room. He played the brick game for a few more hours but soon got fed up with the small images on his phone screen. So, after throwing the phone to the side, Zachary jumped into his bed and decided to take a short nap. He slept soundly and soon forgot everything else in the world.

"Knock! Knock! Knock..."

After what seemed like a short time, rapid knocking sounds on the door pushed Zachary out of slumberland. His eyes immediately fluttered open, and he jumped out of bed before stepping forward and pulling open his hotel room door.

"Coach!" Zachary's eyes widened when he noticed Coach Johansen standing before his door.

"It's already 6:30 PM," the coach said, giving him a once over. "Only two hours and fifteen minutes are remaining to kick-off. But I can see that you're not concerned. You're even still sleeping."

"Sorry, coach," Zachary replied, smiling sheepishly. "I dozed off without setting my alarm. I wasn't aware of the passing of the hours. But I'm ready to head out at any time."

Coach Johansen nodded and smiled. "Sleeping is also a good sign. It means that you're not under any pressure before the final. Let's hope that your confidence turns into match-winning skills later tonight."

"Don't worry, coach," Zachary said. "I'm ready to do my best in the game today. I'll give more than a hundred percent to fight for a win in the final."

Coach Johansen smiled and said, "That puts my heart at ease."

"Are we about to set off to the stadium?" Zachary hurriedly asked.

"Yes," the coach replied. "We are supposed to be setting off at 7:15 PM. So, you need to hurry up and eat dinner before joining your teammates in the hotel lobby. I want you fully satiated with food and in your best state during the final."

"Aye, coach," Zachary replied. "I'll quickly prepare and head to the restaurant for dinner. Don't worry."

"Good," Coach Johansen said. "See you at 7:10, then."

"See you at 7:10."

At seven o'clock that evening, the Rosenborg players began congregating in the hotel lobby one after the other. They were all in suits, specifically prepared for the finals. They were also much quieter than usual and exuded intense auras, like soldiers about to head out for a life-and-death battle. Their fighting spirit had already soared through the roof, and they were obviously already in the zone. They were probably thinking and dreaming about destroying Sevilla in the Europa League finals.

Zachary, who'd overslept and almost missed out on dinner, arrived last in the lobby. He looked dapper in his all-black suit that emphasized his tall frame. His relaxed afro hairstyle, integrated with a trendy undercut, added a wild charm to his entire persona. He looked intimidating and dauntingly handsome as he stepped into the hotel lobby.

"Okay, okay," Coach Johansen said, breaking the murmurs in the lobby. "It's already 7:10 PM. Less than two hours remain before the start of the game. But luckily, everyone, including Zachary, the sleepyhead, has arrived."

Most of the players in the lobby laughed at that and called Zachary a few more weird names. Zachary, of course, maintained a poker face and ignored them. But on the inside, he was smiling. The coach's joke seemed to have lightened the mood around the team. As a result, his teammates were more relaxed than before. So, Zachary didn't have to worry about them crumbling under pressure before the final.

"Okay, guys," Coach Johansen yelled again. "It's time for us to head to the Juventus Stadium for the Europa League final. We're about to face off against Sevilla in what could be the climax, but not the end of the glorious moments of most of our careers. Guys, are you ready?"

"Yes, coach," the players yelled back in chorus.

"Are you all ready?" The coach asked again.

"Yes, coach." The players were even louder than before.

"That's the spirit." Coach Johansen smiled while nodding. "Let's step out of the hotel and board the bus immediately. Let's head out there and play as a team. And let's hope we return here later in the night with the Europa League Trophy. May all the luck in the world be with us tonight."
