

The Penalty Arc

by Lenora Vale

Two rival strikers. One post-match hotel corridor. Game on.

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The problem with Zara Okafor's job was that she had to be objective about people she was not objective about.

She was a sports journalist — specifically, she covered the Meridian FC women's team for a national outlet, which meant she spent a meaningful portion of her professional life in the vicinity of Lena Vasquez, Meridian's captain, who was technically her subject and practically her specific problem.

Lena Vasquez played midfield with the particular ferocity of someone who had been told she was too aggressive and had decided to be more aggressive in response. She was twenty-nine, had played at two World Cups, and communicated with journalists in the efficient manner of a person who had learned exactly how much and no more. She and Zara had been circling a mutual dislike for two years, which had started with a piece Zara had written about Meridian's pre-season form that Lena had told a press conference was "technically accurate but missing the point," and which Zara had responded to by asking in print what the point was.

Lena had not replied. She had scored a hat trick the following week, which Zara had reported with complete professional detachment.

The defining incident happened at an away match in Lyon, in a corridor that smelled of liniment, twenty minutes before post-match interviews were scheduled.

Lena came around the corner with her hair still wet from the showers and her expression somewhere between a player who had just won a hard match and a player who had not yet had enough space to come down from it. Zara came around the corner with her recorder and her notepad and her professional face.

They both stopped.

"Vasquez," Zara said.

"Okafor," Lena said.

Behind them, the corridor was empty. The rest of the press pack was still in the conference room waiting for the scheduled session.

"I wasn't going to ask about the penalty," Zara said.

"I know," Lena said. "You wouldn't."

A pause. The penalty — first of the match, disputed, called correctly as it turned out — had been the pre-match conversation in every interview all week. Zara had written about the referee controversy and had not once implied Lena had dived, which was more than she could say for three other outlets.

"You wrote the piece about the structural funding gap last month," Lena said, which was not what Zara had expected.

"Yes."

"It was the only accurate piece on the topic."

"The data wasn't complicated if you read the report."

"No one else read the report."

"I know," Zara said. "That's why I wrote the piece."

Lena looked at her with the particular attention she brought to midfield assessment. Zara looked back with the particular attention she brought to interviews, which was the kind where you didn't fill silences.

"I've been reading your work for two years," Lena said.

"I know. You've mentioned it occasionally."

"I've been wrong about some of it."

"You've been right about some of it too," Zara said. "The piece you

mentioned at the presser. You were right that I was missing context."

Lena looked at her for a moment longer. "I could have said so less publicly."

"You could have," Zara agreed. "It worked out."

"It started a fight that lasted six months."

"It started a conversation," Zara said. "Those aren't always comfortable."

Something shifted in Lena's expression — not the player-face, something underneath it.

"We have fifteen minutes before interviews," she said.

"I know."

"Come and get a coffee," Lena said. "Ask me something that's not about the penalty."

The coffee was bad and the canteen was empty and they sat at a table in a Lyon sports complex and had a conversation that lasted forty minutes and made them late to the press conference, which Zara had never done in three years of reporting.

Lena talked about the funding gap — not for the record, Zara confirmed immediately and Lena nodded — about what it felt like to be playing at the highest level of a sport that was still fighting for broadcast hours and sponsor attention that the men's equivalent took for granted. About the three players on the squad who were working part-time jobs between sessions. About the specific exhaustion of being brilliant and having to prove it in a context that kept moving the threshold.

Zara listened in the way she listened when she was actually updating. She asked three questions. They were the right three questions.

"You're not writing this," Lena said.

"Not tonight," Zara said. "I'm writing the match. This is — I'm listening."

Lena looked at her across the table. Wet hair drying. The specific post-match stillness of a body that had been working hard.

"I didn't expect to like talking to you," she said.

"You've made that clear for two years," Zara said.

"You haven't liked talking to me either."

"I haven't disliked it," Zara said honestly. "You're hard to manage. I've found that—" She stopped. "Interesting."

"Interesting," Lena said.

"You push back. On everything. Most people don't push back on my pieces. You pushed back publicly and specifically and you were partly right." Zara looked at her coffee. "I don't get that very much."

The canteen was empty. The match was over. The corridor smelled of liniment and somewhere in the building the press conference was being held without either of them.

"We're going to have to go back," Lena said.

"Yes."

"Or."

"Or?" Zara looked up.

Lena was looking at her with the expression she used for penalty decisions — certain, assessing risk, committed.

"Or we could not do that for another twenty minutes," she said.

Zara looked at her. The specific problem she'd been not being objective about for two years.

"Off the record," she said.

"Entirely," Lena said.

They did not go back for thirty-five minutes. The press officer found them eventually with the specific expression of a person who has witnessed something they are diplomatically not acknowledging, and Zara conducted her interview professionally and Lena answered questions about the match without once looking at Zara, which was itself a kind of acknowledgement.

Zara wrote the match report on the train home. She wrote it well. At the bottom, before she hit send, she added a tag to her notes file: *funding piece, follow-up, full report — speak to source*.

Her editor responded to the match report with three notes and one compliment.

Lena texted at midnight: *The piece on the penalty was good. So was your question about the set pieces in the second half.*

Zara replied: *You answered the set-piece question well. The rest was more interesting.*

A pause. Then: *Yes. It was.*

Zara looked at her phone on the dark train home and thought that professional relationships were supposed to be straightforward and that this one was considerably more satisfying now that it wasn't.

Next home match? Lena sent.

I'm assigned to every home match, Zara wrote back.

Good, said Lena. *I'll play well.*

You always play well, Zara wrote. Then deleted it. Then sent it anyway.

Now I'll play better, Lena replied.

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Zara put the phone face-down. She was smiling at the dark window of the train. Objective, she told herself. Entirely objective.

She was not objective.