

## Greatest 461

### Chapter 461

#### 461 First Hattrick for Juventus

Half-time arrived after a few more minutes of gameplay, and the players of both teams returned to their respective dressing rooms. They were eager to get out of the rain and enjoy a few minutes of rest before returning to the pitch for the second half.

"That was an embarrassing performance," Age Hareide, the head coach of Malmö Fotbollförening, said after his players had taken their seats within the visiting team's dressing room. "We were like complete amateurs against Juventus in the first half."

"I am amazed and puzzled by how you all failed to stop a single player from scoring twice using almost the same run through the middle. I can accept the first goal, as that came as a surprise to me. Zachary was exceptional on the ball and easily cut through our entire midfield to score the first goal. But what I cannot accept is the second goal!"

The coach swept his gaze across the players. "Zachary utilized the same run through the middle of the pitch, dribbled past a few of us, and even had time to make his way into the box to score his second goal for the night. What the hell were all of you doing? You already knew that he was on form. You had all witnessed how deadly he was on the ball when he scored the 1st goal. So, why didn't you try your best to stop him?"

The coach paused and glanced around before starting to pace around the dressing room. He stopped beside one of his defensive midfielders a few seconds later and said, "Forsberg! What went wrong? Where was your fighting spirit? A simple tug on Zachary's shirt would have been enough to slow him down and create more time for your teammates to react. Why didn't you do just that and stop him from scoring?"

Emil Forsberg sighed and shook his head on hearing the coach's question. "Coach! Please consider that Zachary is quite fast when you're facing him one-on-one. His long strides allow him an almost-

instantaneous acceleration during crucial moments, and he can inch past any of us defensive players with his crazy footwork. Moreover, Zachary uses both legs equally well — an attribute that makes him almost impossible to outwit during one-on-one encounters. You can choose to check his run on your

right, but he will alter his center of gravity within a second and break past you from the opposite direction. And before you realize what's happening, he is already far away, causing damage to your side."

"Coach!" Emil Forsberg continued. "I know my words might sound like excuses for my sub-par performance during the 1st half, but I still need to say them. We need to accept and treat Zachary like a world-

class player and find an appropriate strategy to contain him. Otherwise, he'll continue causing problems for us during the second half. That's my honest opinion."

"I was just getting to that," Coach Hareide said, stepping back towards the center of the dressing room. "Zachary Bemba is obviously a talented and skilled attacking player. He can spot opportunities in a flash and create goal-scoring opportunities. But that shouldn't cause us to lose our fighting spirit. We can still do our best and use hard work to check his runs. And if that fails, we can foul him. But we can't allow him to continue doing as he pleases. We must not allow him to cut through our entire midfield as if we don't exist. We must play aggressively against him and disturb his rhythm, repeatedly, again and again. That's how we play against a creative player. Do you tactics board. "That means we'll need to double-team him while 23:59

defending against his runs through the middle. Forsberg, you can understand what I'm trying to say, Forsberg?"

"Yes, coach," Forsberg replied. "But you have not clarified how to stop him exactly during the second half? We need an easily executable and realistic strategy if we are to contain him."

"Our only solution is to avoid one-on-one encounters with him during the second half," the coach replied while walking towards the tactics board. "That means we'll need to double-team him while defending against his runs through the middle. Forsberg, you can partner up with Adu to complete this task. Your role is to stop him from breaking through the middle at all costs. You can foul or pull his shirt, but I don't want to see him creating another opportunity during the second half. Understood?"

"Yes, coach," Both Forsberg and Adu replied.

Coach Hareide nodded and spent a few more minutes explaining the tactics for the second half. He then said a few more motivational words to inspire his players before sending them back to the field of play. He had done all he could as a coach and what remained was for his players to execute his plan and stop Juventus' momentum during the second half.

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The game restarted almost immediately after the fifteen-minute halftime break. And as before, the Juventus players used high pressing tactics to pressure the opponents and win the ball back within seconds. In a short while, they were once again controlling the game with their fluid passing while occasionally launching attacks on Malmö's defense.

Juventus was obviously still the better team during the first ten minutes of the second half. But no matter how hard the Old Lady players tried, they still failed to bag the third goal. Their tactical prowess wasn't sufficient enough to allow them to tear through Malmö's defensive shape. They couldn't link up well to create clear goal-scoring chances as they had done during the first half.

"They are double-teaming Zachary and killing off our direct routes to goal," Coach Allegri said to his assistants. "I have to say that it's quite a good strategy."

The Juventus coach smiled and continued assessing the proceedings on the field of play. And within seconds, he finished a complete analysis of Malmö's defensive strategy for the second half. He could tell that Age Hareide, Malmö's head coach, had switched to a 5-4-1 defensive formation since the start of the second half. Hareide had delegated Emil Forsberg and Enoch Kofi Adu, his two defensive midfielders, to mark Zachary and prevent him from creating more scoring opportunities for Juventus. The two Malmö midfielders, in turn, had followed their coach's instructions to the letter and would sometimes even resort to fouling Zachary whenever they couldn't stop him. Obviously, they were not giving the young playmaker a moment of peace on the field of play.

"Coach!" Maurizio Trombetta, the assistant coach in charge of the first team, intoned. "What's your plan?"

Coach Allegri smiled and said, "These double-teaming defensive tactics can only work against small teams that can only field a single playmaker. But we're Juventus! We have many world-class players that can rise to the occasion and become impressive playmakers. Do we need to fear such tactics? Obviously, that is a big NO. We'll allow the opponents to continue wasting their energy, double-teaming Zachary.

As for us, we'll create another route towards their goal by introducing Andrea Pirlo into the game. I dare them to double-team two playmakers on the field of play."

"Nice plan, coach," Maurizio Trombetta said with a chuckle. "Zachary can occupy the two defensive midfielders and draw them away from Andrea. Andrea, in turn, can take advantage of the circumstances and become the effective deep-lying attacking pivot that initiates our attacks with his excellent passing abilities. It's indeed a good plan. But who are we taking out?"

"Let's take out Arturo Vidal," Coach Allegri replied. "We no longer need his defensive capabilities within the midfield, especially since Malmö has already lost all the zeal to launch attacks against us. Let's introduce Andrea Pirlo in his place immediately."

"Okay," Coach Trombetta agreed. "I'll tell Andrea to start warming up immediately. He should be ready to step onto the pitch within six minutes."

"That's okay by me," Coach Allegri said before returning his focus to the game. He was still assessing and analyzing the abilities and habits of his field players. He was also planning while watching the game with the intent to build a side that was capable of winning trophies on both the Italian and European scenes.

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Andrea Pirlo immediately took control of the midfield after coming on for Arturo Vidal during the 71st minute. He started utilizing his excellent passing range and vision on the pitch to link play with Fernando Llorente and Carlos Tévez, the two strikers. His technical abilities were the best of the best on the ball, and it wasn't long before he created a goal-scoring chance for Juventus.

During the 76th minute, Pirlo skipped past a tackle and unleashed a long-range pass towards the other side of the field. He took out all the midfielders and defenders with a single lofted ball to release Carlos Tévez on a straight course towards Malmö's goal.

Carlos Tévez's pace was as impressive as ever. He escaped the harassment of the opposing center-backs and attempted to connect with Andrea's pass close to the border of the final third.

The atmosphere within the Juventus Stadium became more electrifying as the Argentine stretched out his leg to bring the ball under his command. The home fans cheered at the top of their lungs as they could smell another goal for their club. They were obviously already picturing Tévez scoring the third goal for Juventus on the night.

But regrettably, Tévez's control was not the best, and his first touch carried the ball a considerable distance away from him. As a result, he was forced to run an extra seven or eight yards to compensate for his blunder. And, of course, that extra distance allowed the Malmö defenders to track back and block his route towards their goal. His chance was gone, and his only option was to keep the attack going by passing to another teammate.

"Carlos!" Claudio Marchisio shouted as he ran into an unmarked pocket of space within the final third. "I'm here!"

After hearing Claudio Marchisio's shout, Tévez reacted immediately. He inched past an opponent, heading back towards Juventus' half, before squaring a pass to Marchisio. The latter connected with the ball before passing to Andrea Pirlo. Andrea, in turn, unleashed a long-

range raking pass to find Stephan Lichtsteiner on the right flank.

The attack was on as Lichtsteiner controlled the ball perfectly close to the touchline. The speedy wing-back fed the ball past an opponent and exploded with pace, racing along the touchline like a bullet train on the rails. When the angle opened up, he unleashed a perfect curling cross that darted towards Malmö's box like a surface-to-

surface missile.

Whoosh!

Zachary, who had remained quiet over the past few minutes due to the pestering of his two bodyguards, reacted immediately. He exploded with speed and tore through the final third, racing into Malmö's box like a lightning bolt.

His long strides ate up yards of space like there was no tomorrow, and he arrived close to the near post in a matter of seconds. A wave of adrenaline flooded through him as he kept track of the fast-

approaching ball using his peripheral vision. Not even the aggressive defenders in his vicinity could disturb his focus, as the only thing within his eyes at that moment was the fast-descending ball. He wanted to get the header right and score the third goal for Juventus by hook or crook.

At the right moment, Zachary's previously-mastered CR7 Aerial Finishing Juju worked like a charm, and he pushed off the ground without a care for anything. He towered above everyone else in the box and seemed to hover in the air for a few seconds while angling his head to brush the ball. His heading technique was excellent, and he directed the ball towards the inside of the far post with the slightest of touches. And naturally, his almost-point blank effort flashed past the seemingly dazed keeper and homed into the back of the net.

"GOAL!"

Zachary yelled at the top of his lungs as his feet touched back on the ground. He felt a sudden flare of joy as he had scored his first hat trick as a Juventus player. He whirled around and raced towards the sidelines before punching the corner flag repeatedly to express his delight.

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## Chapter 462

### 462 Becoming a Darling of the Press

As an active General Manager at Juventus, Giuseppe Marotta was the man who oversaw most or all of the club's marketing and sales functions as well as the day-to-day operations. He was responsible for effective planning, delegating, coordinating, staffing, organizing, and decision-making to attain desirable profit-making results for Juventus.

Giuseppe was always among the first group of people to arrive at the Juventus head office in Corso Galileo Ferraris as he was a very busy man. His early bird routine was the same on the Wednesday after Juventus' Champions League game, especially since he planned to read through and sign Juventus' financial statements for the previous months.

"Anything interesting in the news today?" He asked his secretary when he walked into his spacious office that morning.

"Well," the secretary said, "There are a lot of catchy headlines about Zachary Bemba's hatrick in today's newspapers. Does that count as something interesting?"

"That's the only interesting piece of news today!" Giuseppe Marotta sighed as he settled down in his office chair. He was not that concerned about Juventus' performances on the field of play as he knew that his competent colleagues were properly overseeing the football side of the club. What troubled him instead were the fluctuating revenues that had constantly impacted the club's day-to-day activities since the time of the Calciopoli scandal. In particular, he'd been worried about Juventus' declining shirt and season ticket sales over the past few months.

"What are the journalists saying about Zachary this time around?" Giuseppe Marotta asked in passing as he booted up his laptop, ready to begin his work for the day. "Are they still predicting he will become a flop at Juventus?"

"Not at all," his secretary replied. "This time, the journalists haven't been shy to give Zachary over-the-top compliments for his stunning display last night. Some have described his performance as the 'wrath of a god' while others were not ashamed to compare him to greats like Messi, Cristiano Ronaldo, and Ronaldinho. I'm telling you: everyone is going crazy about Zachary's hatrick on the internet."

"Is that so?" Giuseppe Marotta said, glancing up from his laptop. His eyes lit up as the gears in his mind churned and whirled to formulate a bold plan. He smiled and instructed, "Bring me all the newspapers for today. I want to see with my own eyes what the journalists are saying about Zachary."

"Okay, I'll bring them over to you immediately," the secretary agreed before stepping out of the spacious office. She returned a few minutes later with a bundle of all the famous sports newspapers and magazines. She placed it on the General Manager's table and said, "Here they are. Enjoy reading."

"Thank you," Giuseppe Marotta said and instructed her to go and mind her business. And without further ado, he began the tedious task of reviewing the content of that day's newspapers.

After a few minutes of reading, the General Manager confirmed that all the sports headlines in major Italian newspapers that morning were about Zachary's stunning hatrick against Malmö. The often cut-throat Italian men and women of the press couldn't restrain themselves as they praised Zachary for producing one of the finest European displays of his short and budding career. They associated Zachary with several catchy catchphrases and headlines to capture their readers' attention.

"It's the Genesis of a New Legend as Zachary inspires Juventus to a 3:0 Champions League victory over Malmö with a sensational hatrick." That was the headline in Gazzetta Dello Sport - a famous Italian daily newspaper dedicated to coverage of various sports. The journalist who wrote the article then described Zachary's performance on the night with Italian terms like Mostruoso and L'ira di un dio. But that was not all. Other media outlets, including Tuttosport, an Italian sports newspaper published in Turin, portrayed Zachary's hatrick as something from another planet. The press was literally promoting Zachary as the new deity of football in Italy with their exaggerated and over-the-top praises of his performance.

"This is fantastic! It's a rare opportunity to improve our shirt and ticket sales." Giuseppe Marotta thought, smiling. He placed the hard copy magazines to the side and turned his attention to his already booted laptop's screen to peruse more articles about Zachary on the internet.

Naturally, Giuseppe Marotta soon noticed a few voices of descent among those who reacted to Zachary's stunning performance on the night. A few haters attributed his impressive achievements to the glaring weaknesses of the opponents, while others just expressed that his hatrick was because of luck rather than individual skill. The critics and haters were obviously not ashamed to post such senseless words on the internet.

"Yes, Zachary scored a hatrick," Roberto Juarez, a famous sports critic, wrote on his blog. "He scored three goals against Malmö, a weak team from the low-tier Swedish league. Big Deal! Why all the hype? I have to point out that I have absolutely nothing against Juventus or Zachary Bemba. I'm even quite happy for him as he's finally beginning to make his mark in Juventus. But all I'm saying is that this Italian media's reaction to a hatrick against a weaker side shows how desperate Italian football is on the European Stage."

Roberto Juarez had only written the article as a passing comment after noticing the over-the-top reaction of the Italian press to Zachary's hatrick. But that one publication caused him problems on that Wednesday morning. A large group of Italian football fans reacted almost immediately and replied to his post with sharp words. Some people called him a loser desperate for attention, while others labeled him an incompetent journalist who didn't understand the game of football. They didn't mince words with the guy who had just insulted the performance of their new football icon.

But that was not the end of all the drama on the internet. A war of words erupted at nine in the morning after a Juventus fan compared Zachary Bemba to Cristiano Ronaldo in a Twitter post. The ever-vocal Real Madrid and Manchester United supporters, making up a considerable fraction of CR7's fanbase, were quick to reply to the Tweet with fierce comments. They dubbed the person who posted the Tweet

delusional and reminded him about CR7's multiple Ballon d'Or awards. As usual, they couldn't allow anyone to compare their footballing icon to any other player, with the exception of Messi, of course.

"Giana!" Giuseppe Marotta called out to his secretary after reading the articles about Zachary. "Come here for a second. I have some instructions for you."

"Yes, boss," the secretary said as she stepped back into the office. "How can I be of service to you?"

Giuseppe smiled, glancing at his secretary. "Giana! Please head to the publicity office and inform them to find ways to make Zachary's story more popular. I want him to become a household name in Turin as soon as possible. Only then will we be able to witness a rise in his shirt sales. Understood?"

"Yes, boss, I'll go and inform them," the secretary replied dutifully.

"Good." Giuseppe nodded and returned his focus to his computer screen. He was ready to begin the tedious work of reading the club's financial statements before signing them. He couldn't afford to waste time since he had a long day ahead.

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After Giuseppe Marotta's secretary delivered his directive to the people concerned, the highly-efficient machine that was Juventus' publicity office went into motion. The publicity officers didn't waste time posting articles and videos about Zachary to make his story more widespread on the global web. They also worked with their contacts in leading media houses, television studios, and radio stations to advertise the product that was their new number 10. They were relentless in their publicity efforts, and it wasn't long before Zachary's hatrick became a top trending topic in Italy.

But that was only the beginning, and what followed was only natural. The rest of Europe caught on to the craze, and several Spanish, English, and French pundits, among others, held talk shows to assess Zachary's Champions League performance. They dissected his every move during the game against Malmö and evaluated all his goals on several platforms, including YouTube, live television, and radio programs. And like their counterparts in Italy, they were soon showering Zachary with praises and going on about how he was maturing into a footballing sensation very quickly. All that triggered more discussions about Zachary within the European football community, making him a trending topic all over the continent. He was fast becoming a superstar without even trying hard.

"Boss! Boss!" Giana, the secretary, said as she rushed into Giuseppe Marotta's office on the evening of the same day. "Your strategy worked. There has been a significant increase in the revenue from Zachary's shirt sales in just a span of six hours. Our outlets are still selling thousands of Zachary's number 10 shirts even as I speak now."

"Excellent," Giuseppe Marotta said, smiling. "Inform the publicity office to keep up the hard work. We must utilize this rare opportunity to create our own superstar. We must make him into a global sensation so that he can, in turn, elevate our club's brand. I can already smell more revenue from shirt sales, mega sponsors, and TV rights. We have a rare opportunity to go big on our hands."

"But sir," Giana said, "What if Zachary fails to remain consistent and doesn't perform well during the upcoming games? Won't all our publicity efforts come back to bite us in the ass? And aren't we just setting up Zachary for a terrible fall if it so happens that he doesn't live up to expectations?"

In response, Giuseppe smiled and said, "I have already talked to the coaches. They all assured me that Zachary is a very disciplined player who's hardworking both on and off the field. Additionally, Coach Allegri has praised him on several occasions as the most focused and most talented player he has ever met in his entire life. Giana! Speak honestly. What are the chances of such a player failing to live up to the expectations?"

"Very minimal," Giana replied honestly.

"Then, what's stopping us from promoting our brand around him?" Giuseppe said. "We only need to incur minimal risk and push him to global stardom. The rest will naturally fall into place, and we'll start harvesting rewards from his fame soon."

## Chapter 463

Zachary wasn't aware of all the publicity efforts put in motion by the General Manager of Juventus since he had switched off his phone the previous night to avoid distractions. He had zero knowledge about how his incredible performance against MalmÅ¶ was fast pushing him to global stardom. He was just in his own small world, trying to recover from his post-match fatigue without a care for anything else.

He spent a large part of his day off cooped up in his hotel room, going through light exercise routines to quicken his post-match recovery. He performed yoga in the morning, ate a sumptuous room service meal at noon, then went through another yoga routine before activating the GOAT Skills simulator to refine his ball skills. He spent hours practicing free kicks, step-overs, Marseille turns, shooting

techniques from inside and outside the box, and other skills within the freakishly realistic virtual world of the system. He didn't stop training until late in the evening, long after sunset.

After stretching his body and going through a warming-down routine, he cleaned up and later feasted on another meal before jumping into bed for the night. He was soon deep in slumberland, dreaming about winning the Ballon d'Or.

The following morning, he woke up early as usual at around six. He was soon in autopilot mode, going through his yoga routine and then cleaning up and having breakfast before readying himself for Juventus' team training that day. And by 8:00 AM, he'd already donned his tracksuit, ready to head out of the hotel.

He scooped up his phone from a nearby table and booted it up for the first time since the night of the match. The next moment, it started vibrating with various SMS, WhatsApp messages, and voicemail alerts -- all tell-tale signs that many people had tried to contact him when his phone was off the previous day. But him being Zachary, he still ignored all the notifications and chose to call Angelo Mattiello, his guide and interpreter, first. He was eager to find out whether the Italian had already arrived to pick him up and transport him to the Juventus training center.

"Hello, Zachary," Angelo replied from the side of the line right after the call connected. "How's your morning?"

"Pretty good," Zachary responded. "Where are you? Have you arrived yet?"

"Yes," Angelo said. "I'm already here in the parking lot of the J Hotel, waiting for you."

"Okay, then," Zachary said. "Wait for me a little longer. I'll be down in five minutes."

Zachary immediately ended the call before shoving the phone into his tracksuit's trouser pocket. He then stepped into his glossy green Nike Flex sneakers before throwing his gym bag over his shoulder and exiting his hotel room.

A few minutes later, he had already descended the stairs and arrived at the reception area of the J Hotel. His gait exuded unbridled confidence as he walked towards the counter to hand in his room key.

But on the inside, he was in a confused state. He couldn't understand why all the people he'd met on his way down the stairs had exhibited peculiar mannerisms.

For instance, the often mean-faced middle-aged waitress that usually dusted the walls flashed him a smile when he greeted her. Then, there were the other hotel workers who gave him slight bows when he passed by them. And now, after arriving in the hotel's lobby, the same scenario was playing out again, and everyone was stealing glances at him as if he was some tourist attraction. The whole situation was odd, especially since he was in the J Hotel -- a facility that usually hosted several famous names from Italy's football scene all year round. People at such a hotel should not have given him all that attention and respect even if he was a footballer under contract with Juventus.

"Zachary!" The familiar and beautiful waitress at the counter said, standing up on seeing Zachary arrive. "Good morning to you." She greeted in English as her face lit up with a smile. She was a brunette with a full figure, dimpled cheeks, and the brightest blue eyes that Zachary had ever seen.

"Good morning to you, too, Antonella," Zachary responded, flashing her a smile. "Here is my key. Please instruct someone to clean my room when I'm away."

"Don't worry. I'll surely do that," Antonella readily agreed and received the key from Zachary. "Are you heading out for training?"

"Yes," Zachary said. "I'm off to the Vinovo to attend the team training until evening."

"But you're very early today!" Antonella remarked. "Anything special going on at the training center?"

Zachary nodded. "We're starting preparations for the game against AC Milan today. So, I naturally have to go early."

"Aha!" Antonella exclaimed. "Now I remember. You play AC Milan on Saturday night. Do you think we will win?"

"Of course, we'll win," Zachary assured, grinning. "Make sure you keep your eyes on the screen on Saturday night. We will discipline those AC Milan boys at the San Siro until they start crying out to their mamas. You wait and see."

Antonella chuckled and said, "Then, I'll eagerly await the match on Saturday. Otherwise, I wish you luck in your training today. Have a good day."

"Have a good day, too," Zachary said and stepped away from the counter. He quickly walked out of the hotel before rushing to the parking lot.

A few minutes later, he linked up with Angelo, and off they went, cruising into the wide streets of Turin. Angelo was, of course, the driver driving Zachary to the Vinovo for training. He was on the steering wheel while Zachary was in the back seat of the comfy Citroën.

"Did you watch the sports news yesterday?" Angelo asked after another few minutes of driving.

"Nope," Zachary replied and started going through the notifications on his phone. "I haven't watched the news like for forty-eight hours."

"Then, you missed out big time," Angelo said. "What were you doing? The whole of Italy and Europe was going on about your hatrick against Malmø yesterday. But you didn't bother to follow! You're one weird guy."

"It was a hatrick against a weak team," Zachary said. "I thought that very few people would care. That's why I didn't bother watching the news."

"You couldn't have been more wrong," Angelo pointed out. "You're now like a superstar in Italy. In fact, I would advise you to get some bodyguards soon. Otherwise, you won't get a moment of peace while moving around Turin. Fans will be lining up to acquire your autograph whenever they see you."

"So, that's why everyone at the hotel looked at me as if I was an alien," Zachary remarked, feeling a headache coming. He was beginning to understand that fame wasn't always a good thing. "I really need to hurry and purchase a house to escape the scrutinizing stares of all those hotel employees." He sighed.

"Indeed, you should," Angelo agreed while rounding a roundabout and steering the car into another street. "That reminds me. A good villa is up for sale in Pinerolo, in a locality just thirty minutes away from the Vinovo. It has a swimming pool and many other amenities that could suit your tastes."

Moreover, the owner is selling it at a relatively low price as his company has just declared bankruptcy. So, I really hope that you spare some time to look at the villa and see if you like it."

"How much are they selling it for?" Zachary asked, glancing up from his phone.

"1.5 Million Euros," Angelo replied. "But it would even go for 2.5 to 3 million if the owners weren't desperate to sell. It is located in a good neighborhood in Turin."

"Oh, I see," Zachary intoned. "Then, let's look at it on Sunday afternoon. That will be the day after our match against AC Milan."

"Okay," Angelo readily agreed. "I'll schedule an appointment to look at the house with the real estate agents. They will be ready for you on Sunday afternoon."

"Good, I'll buy it if I like it," Zachary said and returned his attention to his phone. He was still going through the notifications, including an email from Emily about a new endorsement contract offered by Nike. So, he remained silent until he arrived at the Vinovo fifteen minutes later.

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Zachary tossed everything else out of his mind and immersed himself into training after arriving at the Vinovo. He ignored all the attention he was getting from the media and spent the entire day going through team drills under the strict supervision of the coaches. And as usual, he didn't shortchange himself while refining his ball skills or training his physical fitness.

While training, Zachary also noticed that most of his teammates' attitudes towards him had changed. It seemed they had totally accepted him into the team after he scored the hatrick against Malmö. Unlike before, they all looked at him with respect and adoration. They were even eager to chat and get on good terms with him whenever an opportunity presented itself.

"Zachary!" Kingsley Coman intoned when the players were enjoying their lunch at the canteen. "Don't forget to pass to me during the match against AC Milan. I also want to rub off your glory and score some goals."

Zachary chuckled and said, "Don't worry. I'll pass the ball to you as long as I'm on the pitch and you're in a strategic position. You have my word."

"Excellent," Kingsley said, grinning. "Now, I'm eagerly waiting for the match on Saturday. I want to score a goal."

The rest of the players chuckled at that before starting to discuss other things. They talked about many concerns, including their objectives, the tactics used by their coach, and their upcoming fixtures. They were obviously using their lunch break to bond as a team.

The next few days passed quickly as the Juventus players went through strict drilling routines to hone their tactics. And soon, Friday, the eve of the day when they would face off against AC Milan, arrived with regal ease. It was finally time for the Old Lady players to test themselves against another top Italian team. As a result, the entire focus of the Italian football community was beginning to zero in on the famous San Siro Stadium in Milan, Italy.

#### Chapter 464 AC Milan VS Juventus Match Preview

Zachary was in high spirits as he stepped out of Angelo's Citroen after arriving in front of the J Hotel that Friday evening. He was just from the Juventus training center, where he had attended Coach Allegri's pre-match tactical briefing. And naturally, he had made Juventus' starting eleven for the second time in a row within a week.

He waved Angelo goodbye and took a moment to savor the refreshing sights in front of the J Hotel. He stood motionless, watching the horizon absentmindedly without minding anything around him. The dim moonlight shrouded the land, and a cool and refreshing breeze swept around him to wash away any remnants of heat from the day. However, he didn't move as if he hadn't noticed that dusk had already arrived.

The gears in his mind were stirring and turning as he set goals for the following day's game. He had messed up big time during the pre-season and caused his team to lose the game against AC Milan. Now that he was back to full fitness, it was time for him to make amends when he faced the Milan boys the following evening.

He was enjoying his time in Italy. He was having a blast playing for Juventus, one of the biggest teams in Europe. And as the highest paid player in such a famous club, he wanted to prove himself by using his skills to destroy his opponents. He would do his utmost to ensure that no one would stop him during his first game in the San Siro. He would do his best to convince his teammates and coaches that he deserved all the money he was getting from Juventus. He was focused on his goals.

"Bzzt Bzzzt! Bzzt Bzzzt!"

At that moment, Zachary's phone vibrated within one of his tracksuit pockets, and pushed him out of his state of contemplation. He immediately fished it out and glanced at the screen. The next instant, his face lit up with a smile as he realized it was Camilla, his girlfriend, calling. Without hesitation, he pressed the accept button and held the phone against his ear.

"Hello, Camilla," he said, "It's nice to hear from you. How are you doing?"

"Honestly, I'm not okay," Camilla replied.

"Oh!" Zachary was a bit shaken. He braced himself and asked, "What's the matter?"

"Are you really going to pretend that you don't know?" Camilla questioned. "You switched off your phone and ignored all my calls for two days straight. What's up with that? Don't you think about me sometimes? Do I mean nothing to you?"

In response, Zachary was at a loss for words. He didn't bother to give Camilla excuses as he was sure she wouldn't buy them. He just replied, "I'm sorry."

Camilla sighed and switched the topic. "Let's stop with the annoying stuff. How are your preparations for the match against AC Milan coming along? Did you make the team?"

"Yes, I'm in the starting eleven," Zachary replied almost instantaneously. "I'm starting for Juventus for the second time in a row. Will you travel to Milan to watch our game? I can get you a VIP match ticket if you're to consider attending."

"Thanks," Camilla replied. "But unfortunately, I can't travel to Italy this weekend. I have a lot of deadlines coming up next week. So, I have got to stay home and try to finish my work."

"I see," Zachary said, feeling a bit sour. He had hoped he could link up with Camilla after the game against AC Milan to have some fun. But it seemed he wouldn't realize his wish, as Camilla had chosen to stay back in Trondheim with the excuse of finishing up her work.

"By the way, has Emily talked to you about the new contract offered by Audi?" Camilla asked as if in passing from the other side of the line. "My bosses should have offered your party a lucrative endorsement deal about three weeks ago! But your side is not responding! What's up? Are the terms of the contract not to your liking?"

Zachary felt a headache coming and said, "Honestly, I have chosen not to look at any endorsement contract proposals until I settle down in Turin and start playing consistently for Juventus. I wish to limit distractions during this crucial period of my career."

"Oh, I see," Camilla remarked from the other end of the line. "That's understandable. Anyways, Zachary, it was nice talking to you. Let me say goodbye for now. I know you have to go to bed early so that you can be in good shape for tomorrow's game. Just remember that I love you."

"I love you, too," Zachary responded. "Thanks for calling, and goodnight."

"Goodnight," Camilla said before ending the call.

Zachary sighed as he shoved the phone back into his pocket. He could tell that Camilla was a bit angry just from the tone of her voice. She was not her usual charming self — and as a result, their conversation had felt a bit dry. All that caused alarm bells to go off within Zachary's mind as he could feel the distance between them growing and widening. Their long-distance relationship would likely fail if he didn't put in some effort.

"What's meant to happen will happen," Zachary thought as he turned around and headed into the hotel. "I'll try to surprise her with a nice present on her birthday next week. Hope that raises her spirits."

Zachary tossed all the relationship issues to the back of his mind as he entered the hotel. As a one-track-minded footballer, he was once again soon contemplating the tactics for the following day's game against AC Milan. He continued pondering various match scenarios until he went to bed at ten that night.

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Saturday, September 20th, 2014.

Time: 8:00 PM

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The electric lamps hanging on the walls cast a misty glow upon Camilla's face as she lay on a sofa in her living room. She sighed for the umpteenth time that evening as she tenderly caressed her flat stomach. The next moment, she seemed to recall something and glanced at the big clock on the opposite wall.

"It's already time," she mumbled and sat upright on the sofa. She picked up the remote from a nearby table and pressed the red button to power up her 50-inch smart TV. She was, of course, getting ready to watch Zachary's match against AC Milan.

As the smart TV was in the process of booting up, she stared at it absentmindedly. Her mind started wandering, and jumbled thoughts about Zachary fled around her brain. Was he angry since she hadn't traveled to Milan to watch his match? Did he ever think about her while they were apart? Did he truly love her? After pondering various questions for a few seconds, she sighed while subconsciously caressing her belly again.

She was not in the best of moods as she could feel things weren't going right with Zachary. Over the past few days, he'd again returned to his old habits and started ignoring her completely. He could spend days without calling or even sending her a simple 'hi' on WhatsApp. Whether it was because he was busy or something else — Camilla didn't know. But all she knew was that his ignoring her hurt and confused her a lot. She was often left wondering whether he was serious about their relationship or if he saw her as a casual partner to have fun with and throw away later. She was in a dilemma.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the TV host's voice reverberated around the room after the TV finished booting up. "We're about to witness the battle between titans. Viewers! AC Milan will welcome Juventus to the San Siro for their first Serie A face-off this season. Both teams have won their opening two fixtures, and whoever wins the game today will end the night at the top of the table. With me here to analyze the game are three pundits, namely: Shaka Hislop, Steve Nicol, and Joshua Morales. Welcome to the ESPN Studios, gentlemen."

"Thank you," the three pundits replied, more or less in unison.

The host smiled as the cameras focused back on him. "Let's get right into it and start with your predictions. Gentlemen! Who do you think will win this game? AC Milan or Juventus?"

"I'll go with Juventus," Shaka Hislop was the first to reply. "The Old Lady players are on form this season. I don't think that AC Milan has what it takes to stop them at the moment. My prediction is 3:1 in favor of Juventus."

"I'll also go with Juventus," Joshua Morales said. "They have Carlos Tévez, Zachary Bemba, Andrea Pirlo, and Stephan Lichtsteiner. Those players are all on-form and have been impressive during the past few matches. They will help Juventus thrash AC Milan 2:0 in the game tonight. That's my prediction."

"I'll go with AC Milan," Steve Nicol said. "AC Milan has the home advantage and a crowd of enthusiastic supporters behind them. AC Milan also has a fairly strong squad that is shaping up well this season. If they can play their cards right, they can defeat Juventus by a goal to nil. That's my prediction."

"Thank you, gentlemen," the host said with a smile. "We'll get back to those predictions after the final whistle. But for now, let's talk tactics. Shaka! How do you think the two teams will shape up today?"

"Well," Shaka said as the cameras focused on him, "I think Juventus will use the same system they used against Malmo in midweek. They will play a back three, five midfielders, and two strikers. Two of the central midfielders will concentrate on linking play with the defense, while Zachary Bemba will play an advanced role as an attacking pivot or sometimes as a false nine, as we saw in the game against Malmo. As a unit, the whole Juventus team will try to build up play from the back with slow but steady passes as they search for opportunities. And when there's a chance, we might witness a moment of magic from the wing-backs, or we could see Zachary, the attacking pivot, dribbling forward or playing a forward pass to the two strikers."

"AC Milan, on the other hand, will most likely utilize a 4-3-3 formation and play a counterattacking game. Their three central midfielders will remain compact throughout the game to try and stop Juventus' fluid passing. As for their wingers, they will try to run into the spaces behind the Juventus wing-backs whenever there's a counterattacking opportunity. They will be looking to catch those Juventus attacking wing-backs off-guard before creating goals-scoring opportunities."

"Thanks for your analysis, Shaka," the host said before turning towards another pundit. "Joshua! Which players do you think will be most crucial in influencing the score at the end of this game?"

Joshua Morales smiled. "On Juventus' side, it will be Zachary Bemba, Andrea Pirlo, and Carlos Tévez. If those three perform at their best, I'm sure Juventus will win the game. On AC Milan's side, it should be Sulley Muntari, Nigel de Jong, and Stephan El Shaarawy. Muntari and De Jong, the two midfielders, have to stay on their toes to contain Juventus midfield which comprises the likes of Zachary Bemba, Andrea Pirlo, and Claudio Marchisio. El Shaarawy, on the other hand, has to take his chances well and ensure that AC Milan gets a goal on the counter. Otherwise, his team will lose to Juventus."

"Thank you, Joshua," the host said with a smile. "Let's first turn our focus to the San Siro Stadium, where the players of both teams are warming up. They are doing their best to prepare for the match that is about to commence. Will AC Milan overcome all odds and come out on top after the final whistle? Or will Juventus play as usual and win the game? Viewers! Stay tuned. We'll be back shortly to look at the line-ups of both teams."

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#### Chapter 465 Electrifying Atmosphere At The San Siro

In one of the famous neighborhoods of Milan stood one of the renowned stadiums in the world that had witnessed a large part of Italy's footballing history. It was known to many football enthusiasts as the San Siro Stadium, one of the legendary houses of the footballing world that housed two sporting giants - AC Milan and Inter Milan. It was one of the symbols par excellence of the city of Milan, which often attracted large crowds of supporters yearning to watch live Serie A matches on most weekends.

On match days, the atmosphere around the stadium was always explosive. Fans would start lining up at the gates hours before the kick-off, and when they finally got the chance to enter the stadium, most would immediately begin cheering at the top of their voices in support of their respective teams. Their support was what gave the San Siro life during football games.

That Saturday evening, business was as usual at this famous stadium. The fans were chanting at the top of their voices as they watched AC Milan, their local club, facing off against one of their fiercest rivals in Italy. It was only the ninth minute after kick-off, but the supporters were doing their utmost to boost the morale of their players. They were using their loud voices to support their team and ensure it defeated Juventus, the footballing powerhouse from Turin, Italy.

"El Shaarawy! El Shaarawy...."

The AC Milan fans started chanting again as their club initiated another counterattack against Juventus through Stephan El Shaarawy, their left-winger. El Shaarawy controlled the ball well close to the touchline and skipped past a sliding tackle from Stephan Lichtsteiner. Then, before any other opponents could close him down, he accelerated to top speed and raced towards the other side of the pitch as if his life was on the line.

Martín Căceres, one of the Juventus center-backs, soon stepped towards the flanks to close down the AC Milan man. But El Shaarawy was cunning as ever on the ball. He didn't choose to take on the Juventus man -- but instead squared the ball into the middle, just into the gap left by Căceres in the backline. And as expected, his brilliant pass also managed to find Jérémy Ménez, the AC Milan center-forward, lurking in that position.

"Jérémy! Ménez! Jérémy..."

The cheers around the stadium hit another thunderous crescendo as Jérémy Ménez connected with the ball just before the box. The center-forward turned and twisted to escape from Leonardo Bonucci, the Juventus center-back, marking him. He executed a couple of body feints to draw the defender out of position and created a pocket of space to work with the ball. And at the right moment, he accelerated and rushed past Leonardo Bonucci to step into the box. He was almost one-on-one with the keeper and ready to shoot at goal.

But just then, the unexpected happened. Giorgio Chiellini, the other Juventus center-back, committed a mistake when he rushed in from the other side, trying to cover his teammate. The center-back stretched out his leg and attempted to clear the ball off Jérémy Ménez's feet. But luck seemed not to be on his side that day, and he caught the striker's leg just inside the box.

"Merda! Ma che cazzo!" Gianluigi Buffon, the Juventus keeper, mumbled a few expletives as he watched Ménez tumbling to the ground inside the box. The AC Milan striker's acting was good, and he rolled on the ground several times while contorting his face in pain. He was obviously exaggerating his reaction to influence the referee's decision.

\*FWEEEEEEE\*

The referee reacted as expected and immediately blew the whistle to award AC Milan a penalty inside the box. But he didn't just stop at that. He also fished out a red card from his shirt pocket and showed it

to Giorgio Chiellini, the defender who had committed the foul. The referee had reduced Juventus to only ten men within the tenth minute of gameplay.

"Referee," Gianluigi Buffon yelled, rushing towards the scene. "That was Chiellini's first foul. Moreover, it wasn't intentional or malicious. How can you show him a straight red card? Isn't that too unfair?"

The experienced goalkeeper was performing his role as captain and trying to convince the referee to change the harsh decision against Chiellini. But his words seemed to fall on deaf ears as the referee only shook his head in response before signaling Chiellini to get off the pitch. His expression said it all, and he wasn't going to change his decision for anything in the world.

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"Juventus is in trouble now," Carlo Vanzini, the commentator, yelled, allowing his voice to resound across the San Siro Stadium. "They have conceded a penalty and a red card within the tenth minute of gameplay. That means they might go a goal down in the next few seconds if AC Milan successfully converts the penalty. They will also have to play the next 80-plus minutes with only ten men. I can't picture them winning this game unless something unexpected happens."

"You're right," Pierluigi Pardo, the co-commentator, agreed. "Juventus has been playing possession football with a slow build-up from the back during the opening ten minutes. They have been passing the ball from one end of the pitch to the other, hoping to stretch AC Milan's midfield and defense. But now that they have lost Giorgio Chiellini, one of their most important center-backs, I also can't picture them building up slowly from the back to play possession football. They have to adapt and switch to defensive tactics, or else AC Milan will blow them away here at the San Siro."

"I'm sure that Coach Allegri should also see what the rest of us see," Carlo Vanzini said. "He should be making a few changes in the next few minutes. He will most likely take out an attacking player and bring on a defensive-minded player, preferably one who can play as center-back or a defensive midfielder. But who'll he take out? Zachary Bamba, Andrea Pirlo, Carlos TÃ©vez, or Kingsley Coman?"

"I think Zachary Bamba, Andrea Pirlo, and Carlos TÃ©vez are all out of the question," Pierluigi Pardo replied with a chuckle. "Those are players that make things happen for Juventus. I think Coach Allegri will take out Kingsley Coman and bring on Arturo Vidal, a defensive midfielder. The wing-backs can then push back to form a four-player defense with the two remaining Juventus center-backs. Then, in the middle, we might see Arturo Vidal, Claudio Marchisio, Andrea Pirlo, and Zachary Bamba partnering up to make things happen for Juventus. And lastly, on striking, it will be Carlos TÃ©vez leading the attack."

"That's quite an impressive line-up," Carlo Vanzini, the commentator, said. "You might be right. But let's first return our focus to the field of play where AC Milan is preparing to take the penalty."

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Coach Allegri was a bundle of nerves as he followed the proceedings on the pitch. He had wanted to utilize possessive football to whittle away AC Milan's tenacity. But his plan was up in flames after Chiellini got the unfortunate red card. The coach could not continue attempting to dominate possession with only ten men on the field. He had to formulate a contingency plan within the shortest time possible to handle the unfavorable situation and ensure his team came up with a result after the game. He had to make sure that his team didn't lose to AC Milan, one of their fiercest rivals, despite being a player down.

"What to do?" The coach mumbled as he watched Stephan El Shaarawy, AC Milan's left-winger, preparing to take the penalty. He really hoped that Gianluigi Buffon, his experienced keeper, would rise to the occasion and save the spot kick. Otherwise, Juventus would be in deep trouble for the rest of the game.

\*FWEEEEEEE\*

The referee's whistle sounded the next moment, and El Shaarawy started his angled run towards the ball. The AC Milan striker then opened his body and unleashed a grounded shot towards the inside of the left post. His attempt was well-placed and sure to find the back of the net if the keeper didn't save it. But El Shaarawy soon realized that he was out of luck as he was against Gianluigi Buffon, one of the most experienced keepers in the world.

Everything seemed to happen within a flash, and Buffon reacted by executing an acrobatic dive immediately after El Shaarawy took the penalty. On a full body stretch, he managed to cover a distance of meters within milliseconds and pushed the ball off its intended trajectory with his outstretched fingertips.

The experienced keeper had managed to save Juventus from conceding a goal from the penalty spot during the twelfth minute. But Coach Allegri was still tense as the danger was still at large in the box. The ball had altered its course slightly and smashed off the post before returning to the field of play.

"Damn it! Clear the ball away! Anywhere will do!"

Coach Allegri shouted from the sidelines as the ball bounced back into the box. The coach's heart raced with anxiety as he watched the players of both teams scrambling after the bouncing ball. He only calmed down after Kwadwo Asamoah, his left wing-back, got to the ball first and smashed it towards the touchline on the left to clear away the danger.

"Phew! That was close," Coach Allegri mumbled, letting out a breath. He angled his head and continued following the ball that was on a course towards the touchline on the left flank. And that was when he noticed the silhouette of a player in Juventus' black and white colors after it. It was Carlos Tévez.

"Carlos! Tévez! Carlos..."

The visiting Juventus fans started singing at the top of their voices as Carlos Tévez leaped high and chested the ball to the green. Their voices soon combined to form a booming chorus that shook the San Siro stadium as Tévez skipped past a tackle and took off towards the other side of the pitch.

The visiting supporters were obviously excited by Juventus' immediate reaction after conceding and surviving the penalty kick. As a result, they were soon on their feet in the stands as they watched their star player racing along the touchline to initiate a counterattack for Juventus. They couldn't hide their agitated emotions as they could smell that it was a chance for Juventus to outwit AC Milan for the first time that evening.

#### Chapter 466 A Steady Performance

The counterattack was on, and most of Juventus' attacking players reacted accordingly as Carlos Tévez sprinted with the ball along the touchline on the left flank. Kingsley Coman and Stephan Lichtsteiner darted across the pitch via the right wing while Zachary Bemba raced through the middle in sync with the lightning-fast Tévez. They were like four incarnations of Usain Bolt as they bore down on AC Milan's goal like a pack of wolves on the hunt. Anyone could tell they had only a single mission on their minds: They wanted to catch AC Milan off guard and score on the counterattack.

"It's Carlos Tévez on the ball," the voice of Carlo Vanzini, the commentator, resounded across the stadium in tandem with the thunderous cheers. "He has yards of space ahead of him on the left flank. But he chooses to pass to Zachary in the middle. It's now Zachary on the ball..."

Pierluigi Pardo, the co-commentator, followed the proceedings on the pitch with bated breath as his colleague gave the match commentary. His eyes narrowed into slits, and he watched Zachary connect with the short pass from Carlos Tévez. Zachary then twisted and turned to step away from an opponent before continuing toward AC Milan's box like a racing cheetah traversing the jungle. The young Juventus number 10 soon stepped into the final third and faced off against the only remaining opponent barring his way towards the goal.

At that moment, Zachary could basically choose to go at it alone and beat the final defender before trying to score. However, the young Maestro made a surprising decision instead. He held on to the ball for only a few seconds to draw in the remaining defender. And when the opponent took the bait and closed him down, he immediately unleashed a well-timed cheeky pass towards his right to find Kingsley Coman, the other Juventus forward.

"Oh, my God!" Carlo Vanzini, the commentator, continued yelling. "Zachary's sweet pass has managed to release Kingsley Coman on a straight course towards the goal. The young Frenchman takes a touch and steps into the box. No one can stop him. He shoots. He beats the keeper. Oh, my goodness me! The ball is in the back of the net."

"Goaaaaa!" The commentator screamed in sync with the thunderous cheers around the stadium. "Kingsley Coman, the nineteen-year-old Frenchman, has bagged Juventus' first goal just seconds after El Shaarawy failed to convert AC Milan's penalty. We have just witnessed one of the best counterattacking goals in football history. Truly spectacular stuff happening on the pitch."

Pierluigi Pardo, the co-commentator, chuckled. "What's more interesting is that Zachary Bemba, one nineteen-year-old, linked up with Kingsley Coman, another nineteen-year-old, during the build-up that led to the goal. The young talents of Juventus are surely incredible."

"Now that you mention it," Carlo Vanzini said, "I'm surprised Zachary chose to pass the ball instead of trying to test the goalkeeper. He had all the space to shoot at the goal himself but provided an assist instead. He's a different version of the Zachary we witnessed during midweek."

"Yes, that's true," Pierluigi Pardo agreed. "There are many critics and pundits who expressed that Zachary was a very selfish player after Juventus' Champions League game against Malmo. Additionally, the critics claimed that his selfishness was what allowed him to score more than twenty goals during the Europa League last season. But I don't see it that way, and I can't relate to such harsh words concerning Zachary. Instead, I think Zachary is an uncommonly talented attacking midfielder with an impressive vision on the pitch. He's able to make the most appropriate decisions during critical moments."

"For instance, if he notices that the best chance for his team to score is having a go for himself, he will shoot. But if he happens to spot a teammate with higher odds of putting the ball into the back of the net, he will pass to that teammate to increase his team's chances of winning. He's the kind of midfielder who makes decisions based on the situation. And that explains why he passed to Kingsley Coman instead of having a go at goal himself."

"You do have a point," Carlo Vanzini, the commentator, agreed. "But, let's return our focus to the pitch where Juventus is preparing to make a substitution. Remember that Coach Allegri's men are already a player down, even though they are one goal ahead. They will have to play the remaining 80-plus minutes with only ten men. Can they protect their lead and go home with all three points after the final whistle? Let's continue following the match to find out."

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Zachary relaxed a bit when he noticed that Coach Allegri had chosen to replace Kingsley Coman, a striker, with Arturo Vidal, a defensive midfielder. He could immediately tell that the coach was taking precautions by switching to defensive strategies instead of remaining hell-bent on playing possession football with only ten players on the field. If his guesses were correct, Juventus was about to switch to a 4-4-1 system that would enable them to endure and weather AC Milan's attacks after the red card.

"Coach's instructions!" Arturo Vidal, the just-introduced substitute, said after approaching Zachary. "You're to continue playing as the attacking pivot in charge of linking up play with Carlos Tévez, our only remaining striker. But you will also have to fall back whenever we're not on the ball to help in defense. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Zachary replied.

"Good. Let's do our best to protect our lead. We must not lose to AC Milan, even at the San Siro." Arturo Vidal said and stepped away, heading towards his position in defensive midfield.

Zachary watched the midfielder take his position at the border of the final third before returning his focus to the referee. His fighting spirit was already shooting into the skies as he readied himself for the restart of the game. He wasn't resigned to losing and yearned to do his utmost to help his team seal victory against AC Milan even with a one-player disadvantage.

\*FWEEEEEEE\*

The referee blew the whistle and the game restarted. A few seconds elapsed, and the AC Milan players began launching endless waves of attacks on Juventus' box. While arrayed in the 4-3-3 system, they utilized their one-player advantage to outwit Juventus in the most crucial areas of the field and dominate possession. And it didn't take them long to start creating clear goal-scoring chances that tested Juventus' tenacity and defensive capabilities on multiple occasions.

Of course, many of AC Milan's attempts were off target, while only a few were on the mark. But even the few on target couldn't cause any harm to Juventus due to the impressive form of Gianluigi Buffon, the goalkeeper.

The experienced shot-stopper made six incredible saves during the first half and even came out on top after a one-on-one encounter with Jérémy Ménez, AC Milan's center-forward. His performance was out of this world, and he was by far Juventus' best player during the first half.

During the second half, it was almost the same story as in the first. The Rossoneri attacked as if their lives were on the line, searching for that one goal that would put them back on level terms with Juventus. But alas, they couldn't break through Juventus' defensive formation supported by only ten players. They couldn't put a ball past Gianluigi Buffon, the shot-stopper, who was clearly at the top of his game that evening.

#### Chapter 467 When Passing Becomes An Art

As experienced professionals, the AC Milan players wouldn't give up the game easily. They continued attacking — and finally, a clear goal-scoring chance came their way during the 84th minute.

It all began with Nigel de Jong, the AC Milan defensive midfielder, winning the ball in the middle third. The Dutch midfielder expertly slid in to steal the ball from Andrea Pirlo before threading a pass to Sulley Muntari, his counterpart in midfield.

Sulley Muntari, in turn, controlled the ball well before passing into the wings to find Keisuke Honda, the AC Milan right-winger. Honda also worked quickly to control the ball and skip past Kwadwo Asamoah's sliding challenge. When the angle opened up, he immediately unleashed a curling cross towards the box from the border of the final third.

The attack was on, and many players in the box reacted to the incoming cross. The AC Milan attackers leaped up from the ground to attack the ball and try to score while the Juventus men tried their best to defend and clear the danger away from their box. But in the end, J  r  my M  nez, AC Milan's center-forward, came out on top.

The striker won an aerial battle against Mart  n C  ceres around the penalty area and planted a header towards the inside of the right post. His technique was perfect, and he almost caught Gianluigi Buffon off guard with his impressive effort.

But once again, the experienced Gianluigi Buffon was alert. He threw himself at the ball and stopped it from crossing the line at the last second. And before any AC Milan players could react, Leonardo Bonucci, the other center-back, smashed the loose ball away from the box to clear the danger.

Whoosh!

The just-cleared ball darted through the air and bounced in the 18-yard box's arc, close to where Zachary was lurking. It was like the perfect gift for him, and he reacted immediately and pounced on it as if there was no tomorrow.

His long strides covered about four yards in almost a second, and he got to the ball first before any other player. Heart racing, he stretched out his leg and expertly looped it over the approaching Sulley Muntari with the simplest of touches. He then exploded with speed and rushed past the helpless opposing midfielder before twisting and turning to dance out of the crowded space in front of the box.

Whoosh! Whoosh!

Zachary's tricky side-steps worked wonders, and he skipped past two other AC Milan players before creating some space to work his magic. Then, in a flash, he surveyed the scene ahead of him with his eagle-like vision while prodding the ball forward to keep it away from the opponents. And after making his judgment, he unleashed a raking pass towards the other side with the outer part of his boot.

Whoosh!

Zachary's passing technique was spectacular as always, and the ball darted through the air, just out of reach of all the players that could potentially bar its way. It was like a remote-controlled drone as it made a parabola over the pitch and bounced in front of Carlos Tévez, the striker who had just initiated a run towards AC Milan's box.

The ever-alert Carlos Tévez, of course, didn't disappoint. He left his marker in the dust and exploded with speed towards the bouncing ball. The Argentine controlled it in his stride and continued his mad sprint towards AC Milan's goal. Without losing composure, he rounded the keeper, who had come out to meet him, before burying the ball into the back of the net. He had scored Juventus' second goal for the night during the 85th minute.

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AC Milan 0 : Juventus FC 2

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"Oh my goodness me!" The commentator's voice resounded around the stadium in sync with the thunderous cheers. "Another perfect counter has allowed Juventus to score their second goal for the night. Absolutely sensational! The pass from Zachary was timed to perfection, and Carlos Tévez's finish was on point. Simply world-class! Two great players have combined to create magic on the pitch."

Pierluigi Pardo, the co-commentator, sighed and said, "I'm at a loss for words after witnessing the build-up to the goal. Zachary Bemba was in a crowd of opposing players when he received the ball in front of his box. But the way he looped the ball over Sulley Muntari and turned and twisted away from the other opponents to create space for himself was the stuff of legends. But that wasn't all there was to his moment of brilliance. The young playmaker managed to link play with Carlos Tévez with that sweet ball over the entire midfield. His pinpoint pass took all the AC Milan defensive players out of the equation and released Tévez on a straight course towards goal. What exceptional vision! What an impressive passing technique!"

"That pass reminds me of Andrea Pirlo's passes when he's at his best," Carlo Vanzini, the commentator, remarked. "Maybe, Zachary has already begun taking lessons from the Italian Maestro."

Pierluigi Pardo, the co-commentator, chuckled. "Juventus is one step closer to beating AC Milan at the San Siro. They only need to defend well for the remaining four minutes and the added time. Then, they will return to Turin with all three points. They will also rise to the top of the Serie A table

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On the pitch, the Juventus players had just finished celebrating their second goal of the night. Like the rest of his teammates, Zachary was in high spirits as his team had overcome a numerical disadvantage and scored two goals against AC Milan. He couldn't contain his happiness as he walked back to his starting midfield position.

"Zachary!" A familiar voice called out to him.

"Carlos! Andrea!" Zachary exclaimed in response and slowed down. He fell into stride with his two teammates and asked, "What's up?"

Tévez grinned and patted Zachary's back. "That pass from you was sweet. It made my work easy and allowed me to score. Thank you for the assist."

"There's no need for thanks," Zachary responded with a smile. "It's my duty to supply you with balls whenever an opportunity presents itself. I'm glad you scored."

Andrea Pirlo smiled and asked, "Are you trying to take over my role on the team? Why is your playing style similar to mine during today's game? You copied that pass from me."

Zachary chuckled and chose not to answer. "The referee is about to restart the game. Let's hurry and take up our positions. We'll talk about other issues after the game."

"Why are you in a rush?" Pirlo asked. "We're leading by two goals. We need to waste some time before the restart, especially since we're a player down. We also need to take the sting out of AC Milan. That's why all the other Juventus players are taking their time to retake their starting positions. They are executing a proper endgame management strategy."

Zachary chuckled again and slowed down his steps. He didn't need to rush to retake his position after Andrea pointed out Juventus' endgame management strategy.

## Chapter 468 Post-Match Reaction

The remaining minutes of the game were all about game management for Juventus. All the Old Lady players fell back to defend against AC Milan's continuous attacks after Carlos Tévez got them the second goal. They remained compact to prevent the opponents from creating goal-scoring opportunities and even resorted to time-wasting tactics to run down the clock. Overall, their defensive discipline was exemplary during the final minutes, and they managed to protect their lead until the final whistle sounded.

At that moment, when the game ended, the San Siro Stadium exploded with thunderous cheers that shook its foundation. The visiting Juventus fans took it upon themselves to overpower their rival fans with their deep and booming voices. They sang the Juventus anthem for minutes before chanting the names of each of their players. They were having a wonderful time in Milan after their club defeated one of their fiercest rivals by two goals to nil. Not even the loud booing of the few remaining AC Milan supporters in the stadium could deter them from expressing their joy.

In the meantime, the Juventus players were also making rounds around the pitch while waving to their jubilant supporters. Their wide grins were a testament to their delight after they overcame a red card disadvantage and overpowered a tenacious AC Milan side at the San Siro.

"You fulfilled your promise and passed me the ball at the right moment," Kingsley Coman said in French as he gave Zachary a celebratory hug. "Your assist allowed me to score my first goal against AC Milan. Thank you."

"No problem," Zachary said as he returned the hug. "I'm glad you scored. But too bad that we got that red card. Otherwise, we might have linked up to create a few more goals."

Kingsley Coman chuckled. "True! But what is important is that we won the game. We can relax since we're already leading the Serie A table."

"Who says you can relax?" The familiar voice of Coach Trombetta interrupted their happy moment. "We play Casena away from home on Wednesday before welcoming Atalanta to the Juventus stadium on Saturday! Those are two matches in a short span of four days! How can you think of relaxing?"

In response, Kingsley grinned sheepishly and chose not to respond. His expression was like that of a young student caught by a teacher committing a wrong.

Coach Trombetta smiled after noticing his reaction. "Guys! Even though we can't relax, we can still celebrate our victory today. Congratulations on defeating AC Milan today. Both of you were exceptional on the pitch."

"Thanks, coach," Both Kingsley and Zachary responded almost in response.

Coach Trombetta nodded and turned towards Zachary. "You're on press duty today along with Buffon. Head to the press area for the post-match interview. There are reporters ready to ask you questions in English."

"Okay," Zachary readily agreed. He knew that press duty was mandatory for every professional player, especially in big clubs. So, he had to go and face the journalists whether he wanted or not. "Anything I should watch out for?" He asked Coach Trombetta.

"Just be yourself," Coach Trombetta responded. "But don't cause any publicity issues for the club."

"Okay, I will take note," Zachary said. He nodded to Kingsley Coman before whirling around and jogging toward the press areas. A minute later, he was standing shoulder-to-shoulder with Buffon in front of the cameras, ready and waiting for the post-match interview to begin.

"Welcome, gentlemen!" The Sky Italia reporter said, smiling. He held the microphone towards Buffon and continued, "You overcame a red card disadvantage and defeated AC Milan at the San Siro. How are you feeling?"

"Terrific," Buffon responded, shifting around. "It always feels good to defeat AC Milan at the San Siro. Moreover, we have also kept a clean sheet and ascended to the top of the Serie A table. That makes our win today even more satisfying."

The reporter smiled. "As a keeper, you were impressive today. You made many incredible saves to ensure that your team didn't concede a goal. You even came out on top after a one-on-one encounter with Jérémy Ménez. How did you manage that?"

"By remaining focused, of course," Buffon replied matter-of-factly. "My team was playing with a red card disadvantage. So, as a keeper, I had to do my best to prevent AC Milan from scoring even a single goal. With that resolve, things worked well for me, and I kept a clean sheet during the game."

"You're also the man of the match because of your incredible performance," the reporter reminded.

Buffon chuckled and shook his head. "I don't think so. The man of the match should be Zachary. He provided the two assists that resulted in our two goals. He deserves the honor, as we wouldn't have gotten any result out of the game without him."

"But we would have conceded several goals had it not been for your incredible saves," Zachary argued. "That's why the man of the match honor is yours to take home tonight."

Buffon chuckled and shook his head in response. But he didn't continue arguing, probably because he was in front of the cameras.

"Zachary!" The reporter said with a chuckle. "As Buffon said, your impact on the game was incredible. During the first half, you remained composed and set up Kingsley Coman for the first goal. But that wasn't as impressive as how you set up Carlos Tévez for the second goal. I thought you were going to lose the ball. But you surprised me. You surprised everyone and danced out of that crowd of opposing players before unleashing that sweet pass that set up Tévez for the third goal. How did you achieve all that within seconds?"

Zachary laughed and scratched his beard. "Honestly," he said, "I don't know. There was only one thing on my mind at that moment. That was to get the ball away from my box as soon as possible. So, I followed my instincts and found a way out of the crowd of opponents. I created some space for myself, and the rest was easy. I passed the ball to Carlos Tévez, who completed the rest and scored our third goal."

The reporter chuckled and said, "You make the entire process sound so easy. But if I may ask: Weren't you worried about losing the ball while dribbling through all those opponents in front of the box? During the pre-season game against AC Milan, that's what happened. You lost the ball to Sulley Muntari, who, in turn, initiated the counter that resulted in your team conceding a goal."

Zachary smiled and shook his head. "My error during the pre-season was only a one-time mistake. I learned a valuable lesson from the mistake and became a better player. I'm now more confident on the ball and unafraid while taking on opponents. I won't easily lose the belief that I'll come out on top, even against a crowd of opponents."

The reporter nodded and smiled. "Gentlemen! Thank you for taking the time to answer my questions. I know you have to prepare to head back to Turin today. So, let's end the interview here. Once again, congratulations on winning the game today."

"You're welcome," Zachary and Buffon answered in unison before stepping away from the cameras. They were in a hurry as they had to quickly join their teammates and prepare for the return trip to Turin.

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Emilia Vasquez once again hosted ESPN's post-match analysis show for AC Milan's game against Juventus. After watching Zachary's post-match interview, she faced the cameras with her signature smile and said, "That was an interesting post-match interview. Don't you think so, gentlemen?"

Shaka Hislop, one of the pundits in the studio, chuckled when the cameras focused on him. "I like how Zachary simplifies that whole build-up to Juventus' 2nd goal. He basically said that he unknowingly dribbled his way out of the crowd of opponents before providing a simple pass to Carlos Tévez. It was as if he was talking about something inconsequential, like going to McDonald's on the weekend to enjoy a burger."

"But jokes aside," Shaka Hislop continued, "Zachary is steadily growing into his role at Juventus. He's a very talented and freakishly versatile player who's quickly becoming a pillar that instills confidence in teammates. If he can maintain his form throughout the season, he might make it onto the list of Ballon d'Or nominees next year."

"Or he might just win the Ballon d'Or," Joshua Morales, the other pundit, chimed in. "Imagine a scenario where Juventus wins the Serie A, the Champions League, and the Copa Italia. Wouldn't Zachary win the Ballon d'Or if he helped his team win those three trophies?"

Steve Nicol, the third pundit, chuckled, shaking his head. "Gentlemen! I think we're getting ahead of ourselves here. The season has just commenced, and you're already debating next year's Ballon d'Or winners! We should instead discuss whether he will win the Golden Boy award this year."

"The Golden Boy award is a done deal for Zachary," Joshua Morales said matter-of-factly. "He has no competition for that award. He will take home the accolade if he remains consistent during Juventus' upcoming games."

"Speaking of which, when is the shortlist for the Golden Boy award coming out?" Steve Nicol asked.

"The nominee list should be out within the next few weeks," Joshua Morales said. "At least, by October 20th."

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#### Chapter 469 House-Hunting

The following day, all Italian sports newspapers were full of details of AC Milan's match against Juventus. Their articles described all the crucial moments of the game that allowed Juventus to overpower the Milan-based club by two goals to nil. Additionally, the papers gave a detailed analysis of the on-pitch impact of all the players that played the game.

La Gazzetta dello Sport, an Italian daily newspaper dedicated to coverage of various sports, named Gianluigi Buffon as the man of the match with a 10/10 performance. The La Gazzetta journalists explained that Buffon's incredible display, which included saving a penalty, was the crucial factor that allowed Juventus to maintain a clean sheet and overpower AC Milan by two goals.

The newspaper then rated Zachary and TÃ©vez 9/10 and gave a few other Juventus players, like Leonardo Bonucci and Arturo Vidal, an 8/10 performance for the night. The pundits were also not shy while showering the entire Juventus squad and their coaches with praise for how they handled the game after the red card. They applauded Juventus' defensive discipline that stopped AC Milan from creating many goal-scoring chances during the second half.

Angelo, Zachary's interpreter/driver, smiled after reading all those articles about Juventus. He was especially pleased with how the newspapers had pointed out Zachary's tremendous impact on the game.

"You seem to be in a good mood! What are you reading?" Zachary asked Angelo from across the table. The two of them were in the private booth of a cafe on the outskirts of Turin, waiting for the real estate agent who was supposed to take them to see the villa for sale. Angelo was, of course, passing the time, reading the newspapers while Zachary was enjoying his coffee and browsing the internet on his phone.

Angelo's smile widened on hearing Zachary's question. "I'm reading the sports news," he replied. He then told his boss about how the various newspapers had rated his performance a 9/10 and awarded Buffon the man of the match accolade with a 10/10 rating. Angelo was very detailed in his explanation and made sure that Zachary understood how the press had reacted to Juventus' win against AC Milan.

Zachary smiled and shook his head after hearing Angelo's response. "I'm surprised by the attention I'm getting from the Italian media. I have only played two full games for Juventus, but the press is already making me their focus. They have even begun comparing me to greats like Ronaldinho, Zidane, and Messi. Their reaction is too exaggerated."

"Welcome to Italy," Angelo said with a chuckle. "That's how the press reacts to all great footballers playing in the Serie A. It's even more so when a player joins a great club like Juventus for a record transfer fee."

"Like in my case?" Zachary said.

"Yes," Angelo confirmed. "The reporters and pundits will always analyze your games to verify whether your signing fee was worth it. Of course, if you're performing well, there won't be any problems as they will shower you with praise in their articles and make you a superstar in Italy. But if you're to perform poorly for some time, that's a different story. They will make you seem like the worst villain in Italian football. That's Italian media for you. You have to prepare yourself."

Zachary nodded and glanced at his watch. "Is your real estate agent about to arrive? We have already been waiting for like fifteen minutes!"

"He should be arriving anytime from now," Angelo said. "But to be sure, let me give him a..."

Angelo stopped mid-sentence as a couple of loud knocks sounded from the door. Before he could react, the door was pushed ajar, and an older gentleman with greying hair and a prominent beard stepped into the private booth. He looked elegant in his grey suit as he smiled at Angelo.

"Angelo, my friend!" He exclaimed in English. "How are you doing?" He extended his hand to Angelo.

"I'm doing okay," Angelo replied after standing up and taking the older gentleman's hand. "How about you?"

"I'm also doing fine?" The older gentleman replied before turning towards Zachary. "And this one here must be Zachary."

"Yes, he's Zachary Bemba," Angelo confirmed with a smile. "The one and only."

"Aha!" The older gentleman grinned and stepped forward to extend a hand to Zachary. "I'm Lorenzo D'Alessandro, your go-to guy if you need to purchase a house or any other piece of real estate. It's a real pleasure to meet you."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, too, Lorenzo," Zachary said, standing up and taking the older gentleman's hand.

"You look different from how you appear on television," Lorenzo remarked and released Zachary's hand.

"Is it because of the cap? Or is it because I'm not in a Juventus jersey?" Zachary chuckled and settled back into his seat.

"Well," Lorenzo said, giving Zachary a once over, "Even though you are tall, you're not as intimidating as on television. To a certain extent, you seem like a friendly tourist."

Zachary chuckled and shook his head. He continued exchanging small talk with the real estate agent before breaching the main topic after a few minutes. "So," he said, "Angelo tells me that you have a villa for sale! Can you give me the details?"

"I can do better," Lorenzo said with a grin, "I can take you to see the villa, and then you can decide for yourself if you like it. It's located in the center of Pinerolo, just a few kilometers from here. We only need a few minutes to get there."

"That's even better," Zachary responded. "I wish to see the house. But we need to hurry as I don't have much time."

"Okay," Lorenzo said. "Let's go."

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Twenty minutes later, Zachary's party of three arrived at the detached villa for sale in Pinerolo Turin. It was like a piece of art on the landscape as it stood there, towering above the surrounding trees in all its grand majesty.

On first impression, it was a beautiful piece of architecture that captured Zachary's undivided attention. Its windows were as shy eyes, large enough to welcome any ray of the sun, while its rock walls belonged right where it stood -- as if, by some chance, it had grown up right from that hallowed ground.

"How's it?" Lorenzo asked, glancing at Zachary. "Does it suit your taste?"

Zachary nodded after glancing around one more time. "I'm impressed by the exterior, the elegant driveway, the swimming pool, and the large and impressive gardens. It's huge. It's almost like a castle! How much is this piece of property?"

Lorenzo chuckled like a cunning fox and said, "Hold your horses. Let's first see what it has to offer on the inside. Then, we can talk about the pricing."

"Okay, let's take a look," Zachary agreed after taking a deep breath.

Lorenzo soon opened the door of the villa and led them inside. And once again, Zachary was dazzled by the villa's magnificent interior. It was so welcoming, from the enormous entrance to the wide hallway, causing his spirits to experience a sense of relaxation. He fell in love with everything about it, including the paintings adorning the walls, the old-fashioned parquet floor with a blend of deep homely browns, and the walls that were the greens of summer gardens meeting a bold white baseboard.

In terms of aesthetics, it was an impressive blend of uniqueness and magnificence from the inside out. But that was not all that captured Zachary's attention. He also liked the enormous interior space of the villa spread over three levels.

On the first floor: there were two large kitchens, the first one pleasing to the eyes, with a fireplace, while the second one was a service kitchen with a functional terrace and an adjacent laundry room. There was also a grand dining room, a large hallway, a living room, and a large guest bathroom on the same floor. Then after ascending the stairs to the second floor, one would find four enormous bedrooms with three bathrooms. And if one descended the stairs to the basement, one would find a garage, a cellar, and a fitness area.

Zachary was especially fascinated by the fitness area as it was sizeable enough to accommodate all the gym equipment he could conjure up in his mind. He could already picture himself spending many hours training in that space.

"So, what do you think?" Lorenzo asked after they returned back to the living room. "Do you like the villa?"

"Yes, I like it," Zachary replied. "So, can you tell me the price now?"

"Two million Euros," Lorenzo said. "You must remember that this villa would be much more expensive if the owners weren't in a rush to sell. It would even go for about four million Euros. So, two million is a very fair price."

Zachary creased his brows. "Why is it that Angelo told me that it was 1.5 million? Why are you increasing the price so suddenly?"

Lorenzo shot a helpless glance at Angelo before saying, "Angelo must have been guessing. 1.5 million is just too low. You have seen the property for yourself. It's ideal for those looking for privacy and tranquility but, at the same time; do not want to give up the comforts of the city. Don't you think that it deserves the two million price tag?"

Zachary shook his head in response. "I had only prepared 1.5 million, and that's the amount I'm prepared to spend. Otherwise, I will continue house hunting until I find a suitable and cheaper one."

"This is a bit hard," Lorenzo said, sighing. "1.5 million is just too low. Okay, let's do it like this. Make 1.8 million, and the property is yours. It is my final offer, as I don't wish to waste your time bargaining with you. Meet me in the middle, and let's conclude this deal."

Zachary thought for a moment and replied, "I would like a day to consider this deal. I'll give you an answer tomorrow by seven in the evening."

"Seven in the evening!" Lorenzo remarked with helplessness. "That should be okay. But I can't promise that this house will still be available. But I'll still try my best to wait for you."

"That's okay," Zachary said, smiling. "Thanks. You'll have your answer tomorrow evening."

Zachary had already decided to buy the villa. But he was holding out on finalizing the deal so as to create time to investigate the exact circumstances surrounding the property. He was that careful as he didn't wish to fall for a scam just because he was in a hurry to buy the house.

#### Chapter 470 Consistency Both On And Off The Pitch

Zachary called Emily after returning to his hotel room that evening. In as few words as possible, he told her about the villa he'd just seen and expressed his yearning to purchase it as soon as possible. He even mentioned how he'd promised to give an answer to the real estate agent in charge of selling the house by seven the following evening.

"I think you're so much in a hurry," Those were the first words Emily said from the other end of the line after hearing Zachary's narrative. "All deals require patience. To avoid getting scammed or cheated, we need to investigate the circumstances behind the deal before agreeing to it. You need to slow down."

"I get that," Zachary said. "But I really liked the house. I would be lying if I said I didn't wish to purchase it as soon as possible."

"I get where you're coming from," Emily said. "But I still implore you to first get in touch with another real estate agent who can show you other villas in the same price range. After taking a look at the various villas on sale in Turin, you'll be able to make a more informed decision on whether you like the first one. Additionally, you'll increase your bargaining power during negotiations after collecting more details about Turin's real estate market. There's simply no harm in waiting."

"I see," Zachary said, sighing. "Seems like I'll have to break my promise to the real estate agent. I won't be able to give him an answer tomorrow."

"That would be for the best," Emily encouraged. "There's no need to rush when buying such an expensive villa. Waiting a week or two to investigate the exact circumstances of the property is probably okay before making the final decision. If you find it hard to disappoint the real estate agent, you can give me his number, and I'll talk to him on your behalf. I'm sure I'll be able to convince him to allow you more time to consider the deal with my bargaining skills."

"Then, let's do that," Zachary said. "I'll text you the number of the real estate agent after the call. Thanks."

"You're welcome," Emily responded. "But in the meantime, don't forget to look at other villas for sale in Turin. You never know: You might find a better house in a better neighborhood."

"Don't worry," Zachary assured. "I plan on doing exactly that."

"Okay, then," Emily said. "I'll also work with my contacts in Turin to investigate the circumstances surrounding the villa you just mentioned. I'll have all information about it by the end of the week."

"Thanks," Zachary responded. "I guess we should end our conversation here. I have to go to bed early since we have training tomorrow, early in the morning."

"Okay, all the best. Keep me updated about the progress of your house-hunting."

"I will," Zachary said. "Have a good night."

"Have a goodnight, too," Emily responded and ended the call.

Zachary settled on his bed and decided to make another call. He dialed Camilla's number, and they spent minutes conversing about various topics, big and small. They only ended their call after Camilla claimed that she had to prepare for the following day's work before going to bed. She used almost the same excuse Zachary had employed to end the call with Emily a few minutes prior.

"Oh, my!" Zachary exclaimed after placing his phone on the bedside table. "I forgot to tell her about my house-hunting." He settled on his bed and considered calling Camilla again to tell her about the villa he'd just seen earlier that day. But after a few minutes of pointless contemplation, he sighed and abandoned the notion.

He figured that it was better to leave her alone since she had explicitly expressed that she had to do preparations for work and go to bed early. He would disclose the house-hunting news when he called her the following day.

"There's also her birthday coming up," Zachary thought with a smile. "I should surprise her with something nice."

Zachary had already noted Camilla's birthday in his phone's calendar. It was on Thursday, 25th September, the day after Juventus' mid-week game against AC Cesena. Since he would be free on that day, he planned on surprising her with a dinner date and some presents to celebrate her twenty-six years of life.

He'd also requested permission to travel to Trondheim and be with his girlfriend on her birthday. And since there were neither training nor any other team activities that day, the club officials had allowed him a two-day traveling window out of Turin. In his own way, he was going all out, trying to become a better boyfriend despite his busy schedule.

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Over the following two days, Zachary returned his focus to training. He was always a focused participant in the team sessions as the Juventus players trained intensively to prepare for the game against AC Cesena. And as usual, he was impressive while going through the various tactical drills under the strict supervision of his coaches.

But that was not all there was to his schedule. During his free hours in the evening, he would attend his Italian language classes and also find an hour or two to go house-hunting. He was as busy as a worker bee over those two days before the game against AC Cesena.

Fortunately, his focus and hard-working attributes generated tangible results, allowing him not to feel depressed. He progressed well in his Italian studies and had already started pronouncing a few sentences. He could already exchange greetings or ask for food in Italian. He was taking the necessary baby steps toward achieving mastery of the language.

His house-hunting, however, wasn't progressing so well. He'd looked at three more villas during those two days but failed to find any among them that suited his taste. So, he was still in love with the first villa he'd seen in Pinerolo Turin even after taking the time to look at those houses.

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Time would always pass by quickly when one was busy. In a blink of an eye, two days passed, and Wednesday arrived. It was finally the day when Juventus would face off against AC Cesena in their first battle of the 2014/15 Serie A season. As a result, all eyes were on the Juventus Stadium that evening.

In front of tens of thousands of enthusiastic supporters, the Old Lady players started the match on the front foot. They dominated possession from early on and created many goal-scoring chances by relying on their fluid passing abilities. And naturally, it wasn't long before they tore apart AC Cesena's defensive shape and scored their first goal.

Zachary, who had been as impressive as ever during the first few minutes, opened the goal fest. With machine-like precision, he converted a free-kick from just outside the right edge of the box to beat AC Cesena's keeper. The ball nestled into the top left corner, allowing him to score another stunning goal from a set piece. He had put Juventus ahead during the 13th minute of gameplay.

After the celebrations, Juventus' dominance continued, and it wasn't long before the ball made it into the back of AC Cesena's net for the second time that night. Arturo Vidal, the often defensive-minded midfielder, was the next on the score sheet. After exchanging a couple of one-twos with Zachary and Pirlo, his counterparts in midfield, he magically arrived before AC Cesena's box and pulled the trigger. He unleashed a missile of a shot from about twenty-five yards and beat the keeper to score Juventus' second goal during the 38th minute.

The second half soon arrived, and AC Cesena looked even more powerless to the attacking prowess of the hosts, who duly added another during the 57th minute. Once again, Arturo Vidal was the player who performed the magic. He found the back of the net with another heavy shot from outside the 18-yard-box to score Juventus' third goal for the night. The midfielder was on fire. He was showing exactly why the coach had selected him ahead of Claudio Marchisio for that game against AC Cesena.

With twenty-five minutes remaining, Coach Massimiliano Allegri turned to his substitute's bench, obviously with one eye on Juventus' packed schedule ahead. He introduced Simone Padoin, Álvaro Morata, and Simone Pepe in place of Zachary Bemba, Carlos Tello, and Stephan Lichtsteiner in a single go. But despite the changes, Juventus continued to dominate proceedings as they cruised to yet another comfortable victory. An injury-time goal from Álvaro Morata allowed them to extend their lead and beat AC Cesena by four goals to nil after the final whistle. They had further cemented their position at the top of the Serie A table with another overwhelming performance.

The man of the match for the game was obviously Arturo Vidal, the midfielder who had scored a brace for Juventus. The second-best player was Zachary Bemba, who had successfully converted another free kick before providing an assist that set up Arturo Vidal for his second goal. And lastly, the third best-rated player was Andrea Pirlo, the midfielder who had made the most forward passes during the game.

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Zachary could hardly contain his happiness as he matched down the tunnel after waving to the enthusiastic home fans. He was in high spirits simply because he'd maintained his consistency and put up another solid performance for Juventus. He could sleep well that night, knowing he was making steady progress towards permanently sealing his place within Juventus' starting eleven.

"Zachary, my man," Patrice Evra called out to him as they were about to reach the dressing room. "I'm holding a dinner get-together with a few teammates at my house tomorrow night. Do you wish to come over and celebrate our win over Cesena with us?"

"Unfortunately, I can't," Zachary responded, shaking his head. "I'll be away from Turin tomorrow."

"For real?" Evra asked, stopping dead in his tracks to face Zachary. He continued after lowering his voice, "You know you can get in trouble if you travel without permission. Has the club agreed to this? Have they permitted you to travel out of Turin?"

"Yes," Zachary replied. "They have allowed me a two-day travel window. Is that surprising?"

"No," Evra responded. "If you've already gotten permission from the club, you can travel at peace. Just remember not to exceed the days of your travel window before returning to Turin."

"I'll take note of that," Zachary said with a smile. "Thanks for the advice."

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