

Greatest 471

Chapter 471 Unexpected Circumstances

It was a relatively warm autumn morning, at least going by the standards of Norwegian weather. Camilla was browsing the morning sports news in the living room of her apartment in Trondheim. The peculiar blend of nerves and worry that had recently become a norm in her life was already taking over her mind like a tiny flying insect stuck in her ear. But she forced herself to continue focusing on the articles on her phone while occasionally sipping her coffee.

As usual, she was following the news updates about Zachary, the only guy she couldn't seem to push out of her mind no matter how hard she tried. "Zachary Puts Up another Incredible Display during Juventus' game against AC Cesena." Her eyes took in yet another catchy headline, and she couldn't help but smile despite her worries.

Her mood lifted, and her mind became perkier. She quickly started reading through the article and taking in all the details of Zachary's performance against AC Cesena. A few seconds later, her spirits attained an even higher level of brightness after she learned that Zachary had scored another goal from a free kick before providing an assist that set up Arturo Vidal for another. She was happy that her boyfriend was doing well in his new club. From the bottom of her heart, she wished he would continue shining like a star during Juventus' upcoming matches.

"If he could be as focused as he was on football in other aspects of life, he would be perfect," Camilla thought to herself with a sigh. "But I guess it's true what people say: Nobody is perfect, nobody is a superhero, and the ideal prince charming doesn't exist."

Camilla shook her head and took another sip of her coffee. Once again, her mind started wandering as she thought about her relationship with Zachary. He could be sweet and considerate at times. But most of the other times, he was annoyingly detached and uncaring as a lover. He had his imperfections as a person, but she still loved him.

"If only he could call or text more often, that would solve everything," Camilla thought and returned her attention to browsing the internet on her phone.

While her eyes glazed over the same article repeatedly, without registering its contents, she heard the shy knocking echo in the dim and narrow hallway. She raised a brow and quickly noted the time indicated on her phone. It was only coming to 8:00 AM, but someone was already knocking on her door! Who could it be? Who was disturbing her peace that early in the morning? But all those doubts didn't

stop her from getting off the couch and walking towards the front door. She reached it within seconds and then glanced through the peephole.

"OMG!" She muttered a silent exclamation and stepped back in surprise the next moment. She had gotten the shock of her life after noticing the person standing before her door. Her heart was racing, and she couldn't keep a lead on her volatile emotions for a few seconds.

"Knock! Knock! Knock!"

A couple of more knocks sounded, pulling her back to reality. She took a few deep breaths to make herself appear more relaxed and stepped forward to extend her hand toward the door knob. She was trying her utmost to conceal her eagerness as she slowly opened the door.

It finally opened with some slight effort on her side, and her eyes glowed with excitement as they took in the visage of Zachary standing at her doorstep. But they also contained a trace of puzzlement deep within them. His arrival was totally unexpected.

"Zachary!" She exclaimed, trying her best to sound nonchalant. But clearly, she was doing a shoddy job at it while fidgeting around like a little girl. "What are you doing here?" She asked. "Aren't you supposed to be in Turin, recovering from your post-match fatigue?"

"Ta'da!" Zachary replied, summoning a bouquet of red roses from behind him. "Happy birthday, babe!" He presented them to her with glowing eyes.

"Oh my God! You remembered!" Camilla exclaimed while receiving the roses. Her eyes moistened as she felt warm on the inside. A blissful sensation of sweetness flooded her entire being, and she couldn't help but jump into Zachary's embrace. "Thank you for this pleasant surprise. You have made my day." She whispered while burying her head into Zachary's chest.

Zachary had traveled to Trondheim specifically to celebrate Camilla's birthday. So, he spent the entire day hanging out with her. They started their day together with a sumptuous breakfast at home before

heading out on a shopping trip around Trondheim. They soon began entering various malls and bought several items that interested them.

Camilla, on her part, had even excused herself from going to work by claiming that she wasn't feeling well that day. As a result, she was living in the moment and celebrating her birthday without any worries weighing down her mind. She felt as free as a bird traversing the expansive skies while spending time with her boyfriend.

"This watch will look good on your beautiful wrist," Zachary said after they entered a jewelry shop in City Syd, one of the biggest shopping malls in Trondheim. "It's for you." He smiled at Camilla while handing her an 8000 Euro Panth re de Cartier watch.

"Oh, thank you," Camilla responded and received the watch. She didn't try to put on any pretenses, like claiming that the gift was too expensive or saying anything else along those lines. She immediately wore it on her wrist before they continued their shopping spree.

The evening hours soon arrived, and they returned to Camilla's apartment. They had an intimate dinner together before falling into each other's arms and surrendering themselves to the sweet throes of passion.

The golden rays of the setting sun shone through the window and curtain, just the same, illuminating their tangled bodies as they gyrated and rose up and down with some uncanny rhythm. They were at the zenith of blissfulness for hours and didn't stop their age-old ritual of intimacy until long after sunset.

Zachary regained his wits minutes after the intensive love-making session. "I love you," he said, leaning over and kissing Camilla while she snuggled warmly under the duvet.

"I love you too," she responded, shifting slightly and meeting his gaze with her bright emerald-green eyes. "Thank you for today. I really had a good time."

"Don't mention it. It's what I should do. I'm sorry I haven't been communicating more often over the past few weeks. I always lose myself training."

Zachary reached his hand to her head and gently combed her tangled brown hair with his fingers. The dim artificial lighting in the bedroom made her emerald-green eyes brighter as she held his gaze. She looked so beautiful, so vulnerable, and so pure.

"I'm pregnant," she whispered, turning her gaze away.

Zachary's heartbeat accelerated within an instant. He thought he had misheard and asked again, "What did you just say?"

"I said that I'm pregnant," Camilla said in a louder voice. "And please don't act like most men and ask whether it's yours. I'm very sure that it's yours."

"Oh!" That was all Zachary could manage in response. He was so shocked. His heart jumped as the gears in his mind turned and churned, trying to attune to the unexpected situation.

If he were to be totally honest with himself, he would have to admit that he wasn't keen to commit to any girl yet. He was still nineteen in his new life and wasn't ready to surrender his freedom due to responsibility. He wanted to continue progressing in his career while enjoying life for a few more years. His plan was to succeed in other areas before considering the prospects of marriage or raising children.

Additionally, he was shouldering a few insecurities. He feared the notion of totally surrendering himself to another person due to experiences from his previous life. He was worried that he might experience the bitter emotions of heartbreak again if he was to love another person wholeheartedly without leaving any room for retreat. As a result, he had subconsciously always left some leeway for himself during his interactions with Camilla. He loved her, yes, but he'd not elevated her status to the level of his confidant within his mind. He hadn't told her everything, and he'd neither told her about his fears nor his vulnerabilities. He would even spend days without calling her simply because he had always rejected the idea of making her his wife on a subconscious level.

"Say something, babe," Camila said to break the silence. "Aren't you happy that we're getting a child?"

Zachary sighed. "Of course, I'm happy. But I am also shocked and surprised as well. The news came out of nowhere. How far along are you?"

"About two months," Camilla replied, sitting upright on the bed.

"That far!"

"Yes," Camilla confirmed. "But I only found out about three weeks ago. I have been meaning to talk to you about it, but there wasn't any right timing over the past few weeks. You know how we have been."

"I see," Zachary said. "I need to process everything. Give me some time." He jumped out of bed and went to pour himself a glass of water.

Chapter 472 Back In Turin And New Prospective Deals

Zachary returned to Turin the following morning. He immediately headed straight to the Vinovo and joined in on Juventus' preparations for the weekend game against Atalanta BC. And as usual, he got into a consistent exercising rhythm in almost no time and immersed himself in the team drills under the strict supervision of the coaches.

As for his situation with Camilla, he had already resolved to handle it like a responsible man. Before he parted with her early that morning, he had apologized for his insensitive behavior right after he learned about her pregnancy. He had attributed all his callous actions to the shock he'd received the previous night, especially after finding himself in a situation he hadn't expected. Then, he ended their talk by assuring her he would be there for her throughout her pregnancy. He even promised to do his best to become an exemplary dad and care for the child when 'she' or 'he' finally arrived in the world. However, he didn't mention anything about the prospect of marriage. He would obviously go all out to care for her and the unborn child, but he wouldn't take that significant step forward to legalize their relationship. He just wasn't ready, especially with all that was going on in his life.

Camilla, being her usual understanding self, had listened to him attentively as he spoke. She had at times nodded, as if in agreement, when he said something nice. But most of the other times, she remained quiet and reserved as she took in his words. Then, when the time for parting finally arrived, she kissed him goodbye and wished him a safe journey. She even urged him to call her when he arrived in Turin. After listening to Zachary's assurances that morning, it was as if she had totally forgotten about his behavior from the previous night.

"Zachary!" Maurizio Trombetta, the assistant coach in charge of Juventus' first team, yelled when the Juventus players lined up to go through a speed and agility ladder drill on the training turf at the Vinovo. "You're up. Go first and lead the rest through the footwork drill."

"Aye, coach," Zachary answered while pushing all the distracting thoughts out of his mind. He immediately took off like the wind and started stepping through the ladders. His S+ agility worked like a charm, and he completed the drill without committing any mistakes.

"Bonucci! Sei il prossimo." Coach Trombetta shouted again while pointing at the center-back.

"Sì, allenatore!" Leonardo Bonucci answered with a loud shout. He also followed Zachary's example and started going through the ladder drill.

After the center-back, the remaining Juventus players did the same and commenced the agility training. They stepped through the various ladders arranged on one side of the training ground before moving on to another exercise routine.

The rest of the day's schedule was basically full of more intense training regimens. The team covered all aspects required to prepare adequately for the following day's away game against Atalanta. They performed passing exercises and honed their ball work and movements off-the-ball through tactical drills without raising a complaint. They ended their day with a pre-game tactical meeting chaired by Coach Allegri before dragging their tired bodies away from the Vinovo at dusk.

Zachary was also exhausted, especially after going all out to impress the coaches during that day's training. He desperately needed some sleep to recharge his energy and stamina reserves.

He feared he would fail to perform at his best during the following day's game against Atalanta if he didn't get ample rest that night. So, he quickly jumped in Angelo's Citroën and returned to the J Hotel, which had been his place of residence since he arrived in Turin.

After he returned to his hotel room that evening, he only gave Camilla a brief call before quickly washing up to refresh himself. Then, without losing any minute, he jumped into bed, ready to sink into the welcoming embrace of a sweet and deep slumber.

But just then, his phone started vibrating from a nearby table, its annoying sound shocking his mind back to full attention. He begrudgingly got up from the bed and scooped the phone up before accepting the call.

"Hello, Zachary," a familiar and vibrant voice sounded from the other end of the line when the call connected. "This is Emily. How are you doing?"

"I'm okay," Zachary responded, sitting back on the bed. "And what of you? How are you doing?"

"I'm also okay," Emily responded. "Actually, I'm back in Turin. And I come bearing good news."

"Is that so?" Zachary's ears perked up as he became more attentive. He was even no longer feeling sleepy. "What good news? Go ahead and tell me. I'm all ears."

"First and foremost," Emily said, "My contacts in Turin investigated the circumstances of that mansion for sale in Pinerolo, Piedmont. They didn't find any issues with its ownership. So, you can go ahead and purchase it. That's if you still like it."

"Of course, I still like it," Zachary replied. "I have looked at a few more villas over the past week, but none of them can compare to that one in Pinerolo. I still want to purchase it."

"Then, you have the go-ahead from me," Emily said. "Do you need some help with the property transfer procedures?"

"I think I do. I need someone to handle the legal process of the property purchase. Can you help me out?"

Emily chuckled from the other end of the line. "You seem desperate. But I still have to disappoint you. I have no expertise or experience handling real estate deals, especially in Italy. The best I can do is recommend a suitable solicitor to help you out."

"Oh!" Zachary said, feeling a bit disappointed. He trusted Emily the most and would have liked for her to handle the legal process of the deal.

"You don't need to be worried," Emily said as if reading his mind. "The person I'm recommending is a solicitor and friend, skilled in handling real estate deals. His name is Matteo Tavano, and he operates in Turin. I think he's the ideal solicitor to help you complete that property purchase."

"Okay," Zachary said. "I guess I'll go with that one. How can I get in touch with him?"

"You don't need to contact him," Emily said. "I'll tell him to contact you. When do you plan to start the legal process of purchasing the villa?"

"Sunday afternoon would be fine. That will be the day after our game with Atalanta. I'll be free."

"Okay, then. I'll tell Matteo to contact you on Sunday morning. You can plan out the rest of the details with him. But remember to keep me in the loop so I can be ready to help you when a need arises."

"I'll do that," Zachary promised. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. House deals aside: there's a new big endorsement offer from a new company. It's called Vector X, an upcoming sports goods manufacturer from India. They have sent me a very lucrative offer, hoping to get you on board as their brand ambassador."

Zachary was a bit confused upon hearing that. "Don't we still have about two years on our deal with Nike? They have already increased the money they pay me annually to 1.5 million Euros. Why should we consider another footwear manufacturer when there are them?"

Emily chuckled from the other end of the line. "Before you say anything else, can you first guess the amount Vector X is offering to steal you away from Nike?"

"I'm not good at guessing," Zachary admitted. "Just tell me."

Emily chuckled again. "We're talking about a base income of six million Euros per year if you become a brand ambassador for Vector X. They also hinted at offering you more than 50 percent of profits from your own branded Vector X merchandise."

Zachary's mind went blank on hearing such offers. He was starting to get tempted by the promise of such a lucrative deal. "But we're still under contract with Nike," he reminded after thinking things through for a moment. "We can't just walk away from an endorsement contract after receiving another. Nike would sue us for breach of the contract terms."

"You don't have to worry about that," Emily assured. "There are always ways to walk away from a contract penalty-free. Just give me the go-ahead, and I'll handle the procedures for you."

"I see." Zachary took in a breath of air to calm himself down. As a professional footballer, he understood that he had only a small time window to make big money. He had to utilize all the opportunities to rake in ample savings so that he would be beyond financially stable and never have to face any hardships after his retirement. And as far as he was concerned, the Vector X deal was a chance to add more zeros to his bank account balance. He already knew he couldn't miss it.

"So, what's your decision, Zachary?" Emily asked from the other end of the line. "Should we consider the offer from Vector X? Or should we ignore them? It's your call."

"I think we should first look at the details of what they are offering," Zachary responded. "If their offer is one we cannot refuse, we can consider terminating our relationship with Nike."

"Good call," Emily praised. "Those are exactly my thoughts. I'll first meet the Vector X representatives and hear out the terms of their offer in detail. If the terms are lucrative enough and hard to refuse, I'll notify you, and we can start the process of ending our business relationship with Nike."

"Are you sure that walking away from Nike won't have any backlash on us?" Zachary asked worriedly.

"Nope," Emily replied, her voice filled with confidence. "The worst that might happen is we pay a reasonable penalty fee for terminating the contract. But even then, it won't be us paying that penalty. I'll make sure that the bill falls on Vector X. They will have to pay your breach of contract penalty fee if they wish to steal you away from Nike."

"You're evil." Zachary chuckled. "But I like it."

Emily laughed and said, "I guess we should end our conversation for today. I wish you all the best in the match tomorrow. By the way, I forgot to ask: Did you make the starting eleven again?"

"Yes, I did," Zachary replied proudly. "I'm once again in the starting eleven."

"It's your fourth successive start for Juventus. Congratulations. Your new coaches are starting to trust you more and more."

"That seems like it," Zachary said. "Emily. I need to go to bed now. So, let's continue our discussion some other day."

"Okay, have a good night."

"Good night to you, too," Zachary said before ending the call. He placed his phone on the nearby bedside table and jumped into bed. Before long, he was already fast asleep, dreaming about scoring goals during the following day's game against Atalanta.

Chapter 473 Against Atalanta

Saturday, September 27, 2014.

Stadio di Bergamo, Lombardy, Italy.

It was a breezy evening in the scenic city of Bergamo, located in the alpine Lombardy region of northern Italy. Thick clouds blotted out the stars, and a chilly wind occasionally blew in from the north — all clear signs that it might rain anytime. But the promise of bad weather couldn't stop the enthusiastic Italian football supporters from heading to the Stadio di Bergamo to watch that evening's Serie A match between Atalanta and Juventus.

By 8:30 PM, more than twenty thousand fans had already taken up the seats in the stadium. They sang at the top of their voices as they awaited the match kick-off, which was only fifteen minutes away. Their enthusiasm was obviously already shooting into the sky.

Emily and Kristin, the two ladies who had journeyed all the way to Bergamo to watch Zachary play, were also among the group of zealous supporters. Their beauty made them stand out from the crowd as they craned their necks to watch what was transpiring on the field of play.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" The Italian commentator's voice reverberated around the stadium when the teams started marching out of the tunnel. "Welcome to Stadio di Bergamo! We're about to witness this season's first Serie A battle between Atalanta and Juventus. Atalanta will be looking to overcome their poor start of the season, while Juventus will be looking to continue their winning streak and strengthen their position at the top of the Serie A table. So, sit tight and be ready for a tantalizing 90-minutes of football as both teams look forward to winning the game..."

"This Italian commentator is really boring. His voice makes me feel like sleeping. They should hire Peter Drury to do the commentary for the upcoming Serie A matches." Emily remarked in English after listening to the commentator for a few more seconds.

Kristin chuckled. "Maybe, you find him boring because you don't understand Italian that well. But according to the Italians, he might even be a more skilled commentator than Peter Drury."

Emily smiled but chose not to respond. She was fluent in many languages, including Italian, and had no trouble understanding and following the commentary in Italian. But that didn't mean that she found it engaging and fascinating. It was instead the opposite. It was monotonous and a bit too flat for her liking.

"I heard that Zachary traveled back to Trondheim a few days back," she said to Kristin. "Do you know what he was doing back there?"

Kristin shook her head. "I don't know. I even had no idea that he was out of Turin."

"Oh!" Emily said and turned her attention back to the proceedings on the pitch. The players of both teams had just finished their pre-game handshake routine. They were, at that moment, taking their position on the field of play. A few others were completing some last-minute preparation, like tying and tightening their shoelaces before kick-off.

Emily's eyes kept wandering the field until they lingered on the tall visage of Zachary. He looked more striking and imposing after changing his hairstyle to simple braids with a fading style on the sides. His eyes were darting around the pitch — a tell-tale sign that he was observing and analyzing his opponents. He was as focused as ever as he prepared to face off against the opponents.

"Let's hope everything is okay with him," Emily thought, turning his eyes away from Zachary. When they talked on the phone the previous night, she could sense that a little bit of something was off with his mood.

He hadn't even been overly excited after hearing that a new sporting goods manufacturer had offered him a hard-to-refuse endorsement deal. It was as if his mind had been elsewhere throughout the phone conversation — a signal that caused Emily to worry. But even after sensing all that, Emily had held herself back from asking what was on his mind. She had decided to first watch his performance against Atalanta before choosing a way forward.

On the pitch, Zachary was in an intense state of focus. He pushed all the distracting thoughts out of his mind as he settled into his starting position outside the center circle. In the meantime, his eyes were in constant motion, observing, analyzing, and assessing his opponents as he geared himself up for the action about to commence.

As a person living his second life, he understood that he couldn't let distractions off the pitch affect his performance during matches. If he wished to succeed, he would have to leave all his worries outside the stadium and focus only on defeating the opponent. So, not even Camilla's tricky situation could weigh down his mind while awaiting the kick-off whistle. He was as ready as he could be to play his heart out and help his team overcome Atalanta.

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The referee finally blew the whistle to kick-start the game at 8:45 PM. Carlos Tévez immediately went into action. He unleashed a back pass into his midfield to find Zachary and kick off that day's battle between Atalanta and Juventus.

"Juventus! Juventus..."

The cheers around the stadium hit a thunderous crescendo for the first time that night as Juventus started controlling the game with their fluid passing. Zachary passed to Andrea Pirlo, who in turn passed to Claudio Marchisio to initiate a long spell of possession for Juventus. The football flowed like water, and soon, the Old Lady players started casting waves of attacks on Atalanta's defense.

It was only on a few occasions that they lost possession to Atalanta. But even then, they utilized high-pressing tactics to pressurize the opponents and win the ball back as quickly as possible. They were, for sure, the more dominant team during the opening fifteen minutes of the game.

However, even after dictating the tempo for all those minutes, they still couldn't find the back of the net. It was not that they didn't try to test the keeper with all the various tricks in their arsenal of tactics. They went all out while attacking but only failed to score due to the brilliance of Marco Sportiello, the Atalanta keeper, who made more than six saves during the first 45 minutes of gameplay.

Zachary tried his luck with shots from outside the box during the 20th and 24th minutes. But, on both occasions, the keeper negated his efforts by making incredible saves. But those weren't the only missed chances for Juventus. During the 32nd minute, Carlos Tévez beat the offside trap and connected with a pass from Andrea Pirlo. The Argentine forward controlled the ball well before rifling in a left-footed shot toward the bottom right corner. But alas, his efforts didn't bear fruit due to the inhuman reflexes of the keeper. The shot-stopper's performance was clearly the only factor preventing Juventus from scoring the opening goal.

As for the rest of the Atalanta players, they were harmless going forward. They only focused on weathering Juventus' unending barrage of attacks and didn't bother to create any significant chances on goal. Due to their docile approach to the game, they didn't manage to threaten Juventus' goal even once throughout the entire first half. And quite frankly, they were fortunate not to be behind at the break.

After the fifteen-minute half-time break, the game restarted. Everything went as expected, and the Juventus players continued to dictate the tempo with fluid passes. They seemed like a team on track to win the game and go home with three points at the end of the game.

But circumstances changed twelve minutes into the second half when the downpour started falling from the skies. They found it hard to continue playing their grounded and short passes in the heavy rain. As a result, they could only resort to changing their strategy and playing long balls to overcome the hardships posed by the wet playing surface.

Zachary, on his part, also found it a bit challenging to perform as usual in the rain. The heavy pelting of water constantly showered his already miserable frame with bouts of fresh and chilling torrents of merciless precipitation. He couldn't dribble with ease over the wet surface. He also couldn't see the ball clearly at times. But he still hardened himself and continued focusing on the game without minding the unfavorable conditions. He wished to win, and nothing could stop him from doing so, not even the rain.

"Zachary!" Coach Trombetta yelled from the sidelines when the ball went out of play for a Juventus throw-in during the 64th minute. "Move forward and play as a false-nine. We no longer need you in the midfield, as we can't play short passes in this weather. You need to be active in searching for the goal."

"Aye, coach," Zachary replied and raised his thumb to indicate that he had understood. He agreed with the coach's decision, as that was the only way to add numbers up front and increase his team's chances of scoring a goal.

He had to play as an attacker to help his team overcome the barrier of the wet surface with long balls. The rest would then fall in place, and he would find opportunities to connect with the defense-splitting passes from Andrea Pirlo and the crosses from the attacking wing-backs.

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The referee blew the whistle and motioned for the Juventus players to take their throw-in. Patrice Evra, Juventus' attacking wing-back, immediately made a short run toward the touchline on the left flank before throwing the ball into the pitch. His accuracy was spot on, and he found Claudio Marchisio, one of the Juventus midfielders.

Claudio Marchisio, on his part, controlled the ball while skipping away from an opponent. When an angle opened up, he squared the ball to find Andrea Pirlo in the space on his right.

Andrea Pirlo, being the Maestro he was, surveyed the entire situation on the pitch as he connected with Claudio's pass. He found the perfect outlet for the ball within seconds and unleashed a lofted pass toward the other side of the pitch. And with that single ball through the rain, he released Carlos Tévez on a straight course toward Atalanta's goal.

Chapter 474 Diego Simeone's Unease

Carlos Tévez could literally feel his heart hammering like a drum as he beat the offside trap and connected with Andrea Pirlo's defense-splitting pass. He was obviously aware that only less than 25 minutes remained before the 90-minute-mark. So, he was determined to do all it took to utilize the opportunity and put his team ahead before it was too late.

"Whoosh!"

Like a lightning bolt, he cut through the drizzle, his short strides eating up yards of space toward the goal like mad. His level of focus had already reached its zenith, allowing him to remain composed as he prodded the ball forward. And when he noticed the keeper stepping forward to meet him, he squared his body before trying to chip the ball into the inside of the far post.

But alas, luck wasn't on Tévez's side that day. Marco Sportiello, the Atalanta shot-stopper, was alert again. He brushed the ball with his fingertips, thus sending it off its intended trajectory. As a result, it could only smash off the post before bouncing back into the field of play.

"Damn it!"

Carlos Tévez cursed out loud and immediately reacted. He pounced towards the bouncing ball with all the zest he could muster. However, all his efforts were still in vain as an Atalanta defender swept the ball out of play to clear the danger before he could reach it. The Argentine could only place his hands behind his head after missing yet another clear opportunity to put his team ahead during the 67th minute. He was disappointed with himself.

"Don't mind! Don't mind! Let's stay focused and continue attacking. I'm sure that we'll score."

Tévez could not help but tremble after hearing Zachary's familiar voice sounding within his ear. His despondency immediately disappeared, and a yearning to score and make up for his missed opportunities swelled within him. He was once again ready to rumble and destroy the opponents.

"Thanks for the encouragement," he said, turning towards Zachary. "I needed that."

Zachary smiled and nodded back. "We all can miss sometimes," he said. "But what matters is to get our act together and score the next time."

A strange expression surfaced on Tévez's face after hearing Zachary's statement. But he immediately utilized his sleeve to cover it up while wiping the precipitation off his face. On the inside, however, weird thoughts were racing through his mind.

"We all miss sometimes!" He wondered. "How come I don't remember you ever missing a one-on-one with the keeper? Are you mocking me?" The Argentine shook his head, once again feeling frustrated.

"We need to get ready for the corner," Zachary said from beside him again.

"Yeah, yeah," Tévez agreed with a smile. "Let's get ready for the corner." He looked like an exemplary teammate consenting to his colleague's suggestion. But within his mind, he was thinking something else, "This bastard must enjoy poking fun at me whenever I miss an opportunity. I have to score more goals than him this season. Otherwise, his smirk would drive me insane if he were to bag more goals than me."

Tévez harbored no ill will against Zachary. In fact, he respected the young maestro and was happy to be on the same team as him. But that didn't mean he would sit back and let the 19-year-old run the show for Juventus. Tévez was also competitive by nature. He desired to score more goals and help his team win trophies before he retired. And that drove him to give more than a hundred percent during every match of the just-commenced Serie A season.

FWEEEEEEE

The referee finally blew the whistle to signal the taking of the corner kick after arranging the players in the box. The next moment, the cheers around the stadium hit another thunderous zenith as Andrea Pirlo, the Italian maestro, sent forth a lofted ball into the crowded box from the corner arc.

It was another chance for Juventus to try for an opening goal, and of course, most players went into action. Carlos Tévez ran toward the near post and tried to connect with the incoming ball. However, his height betrayed him, and he couldn't get to it. Then, Leonardo Bonucci also tried but also failed due to harassment from an opposing defender. And finally, it was Zachary's turn to act.

"Whoosh!"

Zachary pushed off the ground and rose into the air with unstoppable momentum. He battled an Atalanta center-back for aerial superiority before angling his head and directing the incoming ball toward the top right corner. The CR7 Aerial-finishing Juju bloomed in splendor, and his well-placed effort easily beat the keeper and nestled into the back of the net.

"GOAL!" Zachary yelled out loud after descending back to the ground. At long last, he had managed to break the deadlock and put his team ahead during the 69th minute. He couldn't contain his delight and rushed toward the touchline to celebrate with his coaches and teammates.

"This bastard has some dog shit luck," Tévez thought as he chased after Zachary to celebrate the goal. "He has scored another goal from a corner kick. Damn!"

The Argentine was complaining inwardly. But he was also relieved since his team was finally in the lead. He had been feeling the pressure, especially after missing two one-on-ones with the keeper. But after Zachary scored, he felt like he had unloaded a weight off his shoulders. He could finally concentrate on the game without any burdens weighing down his mind.

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Atalanta BC 0 : Juventus FC 1

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Diego Simeone, the head coach of Atletico Madrid, was watching the game between Atalanta and Juventus on a screen in his office in Madrid, Spain. Beside him were his two assistants - Germán Burgos and Juan Vizcaíno, who were also following the Serie A match. The three men were obviously not supporters of Juventus. But they were only doing research to prepare for Atletico Madrid's Champions League face-off against the Italian giants.

The diffuse light from the 50-inch flat-screen lit up Diego Simeone's face and highlighted the frown outlining his facial features. He was getting more worried, especially after assessing Zachary's and

Andrea Pirlo's performances during the game. They were the playmakers for Juventus and would surely give his team a hard time come Wednesday night.

"We must find a way to prevent Zachary and Andrea Pirlo from creating chances for Juventus," he said to his assistants beside him. "Otherwise, Juventus will tear us apart on Wednesday."

"I agree," Germán Burgos, one of his assistants, said. "Andrea Pirlo is the deep-lying playmaker and can create goal-scoring opportunities out of nothing with his long passes. On the other hand, Zachary is the attacking pivot. He's a brilliant player who will cause problems for our defense during the game. We need to stop both of...."

The assistant coach stopped mid-sentence after realizing that there was another development in the game. He pushed the distracting thoughts out of his mind and started following the commentary and the action on the screen.

"It's Zachary on the ball," the commentator's voice sounded through the speakers. "He dribbles past one and jumps past another. He's approaching Atalanta's box at breakneck speed..."

Diego Simeone was also following the action while holding his breath. The coach got goosebumps all over his body as he watched Zachary wiggle and dance through a group of opponents. Then, like a magician, the young footballer sidestepped past an opposing defensive midfielder and continued bearing down on Atalanta's box like a raging Tsunami. He created ample space to work with the ball and then unleashed a missile toward the goal from outside the box.

"Zachary takes his chances from thirty yards away," the commentator's voice continued making its way into the ears of the three men. "He shoots. He finds the back of the net. Goal! That was a beauty from the 19-year-old playmaker. He has extended Juventus' lead against Atalanta to two goals during the 88th minute. It's now Atalanta zero and Juventus two. The Old Lady is surely in charge..."

Diego Simeone's frown deepened. He immediately picked up the remote and lowered the volume of the screen. In the meantime, his mind was racing and working at full throttle. But he still couldn't find ways to simultaneously contain Zachary and Andrea Pirlo, especially if both playmakers were at the top of their game.

"Why don't we treat them like how we treat Real Madrid and Barcelona?" Juan Vizcaíno, the other coaching assistant, suggested. "We play a defensive game against Juventus while waiting for opportunities. As for Zachary and Pirlo, we can tell the boys to be extra physical with them. I'm sure they won't be able to find their best rhythm if we rough them up a few times."

Diego Simeone sighed. "The first plan is okay as Juventus is a much stronger team than us, especially in midfield. We'll have to play defensively against them to get a result. However, roughing up Zachary and Pirlo might cause problems for us."

"Why?" Juan Vizcaíno questioned. "Is it because of Zachary's free kicks?"

Diego Simeone nodded. "The boy's conversion rate is insane. We can't gift him free kicks near our box."

"I think we need someone to watch him throughout the game," Germán Burgos said. "We need a player who's quick and versatile on the ball and with a lot of stamina to mark him."

"Like Saúl Ñíguez or Koke?" Juan Vizcaíno asked.

"I think Ñíguez would fit the role better," Diego Simeone supplied. "His athleticism and game-reading abilities are impressive. He should be able to keep up with Zachary throughout the match."

Juan Vizcaíno nodded, and the three men continued discussing various strategies they could employ against Juventus for a few more minutes. They only ended their talk after the game on screen ended with Juventus still leading by two goals to nil.

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Chapter 475 Agreeing To Purchase A Villa

The day dawned crisp and clear. The morning sunshine wafted gently in, diffusing across Zachary's hotel room. The golden rays illuminated his face, and he turned and blinked twice before slowly opening his eyes.

"What time is it?" He mumbled while turning and focusing his eyes on the clock on the opposite wall. "9:24 AM! I have really slept today."

He was still fatigued, especially after playing another 90+ minutes of the previous night's Serie A game against Atalanta. His joints ached, and he still felt drowsy, even after sleeping for more than eight hours.

But as a professional, he knew that he couldn't allow himself to continue dawdling in bed on his day off. He understood that he had to do his utmost to recover from his post-match fatigue before starting intense preparations for Juventus' midweek game against Atlético Madrid. Otherwise, if he was to relax, he might lose his just-gained place within Juventus' starting eleven.

"Time to rumble."

Zachary stretched and immediately jumped out of bed. He quickly began his morning routine, which included going through yoga exercises, cleaning up, and eating breakfast.

He completed everything he had to do by 10:30 AM and then sat in front of the TV to pass the rest of his morning free time. Soon, his entire focus was fully-attuned to that morning's ESPN daily sports show.

"Zachary scored yet another brace to give Juventus the edge to beat Atalanta in yesterday's Serie A game," Emilia Vasquez, the ESPN presenter, said. She smiled at the cameras and continued, "The young playmaker now has a tally of four goals in five Serie A matches and is just one behind the leading goal scorer, who happens to be his teammate - Carlos Tévez. For a midfielder, those are quite impressive stats."

"Yes, they are," Joshua Morales, the in-studio pundit, agreed. "Let's also not forget that he scored a hattrick in the Champions League game against Malmo. That elevates his tally to seven goals in six matches, which is a remarkable feat, especially for a midfielder. And what surprises me is that he's achieving all this while still at the tender age of nineteen. He's got so much potential, and I can't even imagine how he will evolve as a player by twenty-five!"

Emilia Vasquez smiled. "Indeed, he's an impressive and very clinical attacking midfielder, especially when it matters. His two goals have helped Juventus cement their place at the top of the Serie A table. He has also allowed his teammates to gain the momentum needed to head into Juventus' tricky Champions League fixture against Atlético Madrid."

"Yes, that is also an important point," Alessandro Costacurta, the other in-studio pundit, agreed. "The Old Lady players and coaches needed the win yesterday to raise the atmosphere around the club before starting preparations for the game against Atlético Madrid. Everything didn't go as planned in the beginning due to the defensive tenacity of Atalanta. But fortunately, their 80-million signing came through and scored twice during the second half to help them win the game. They are now in the best shape for the game on Wednesday, and I think they have a high chance of winning if they play their cards right."

"Atlético Madrid is not an easy team to beat," Emilia Vasquez pointed out. "They are the current champions of La Liga, and over the years, they have managed to frustrate footballing giants like Real Madrid and Barcelona on several occasions. It will be a tough challenge for Juventus to win against such a team."

"You're talking about Atlético Madrid's achievements but forgetting about Juventus' might," Alessandro Costacurta said with a chuckle. "Juventus won the Serie A last season, even before acquiring Zachary. They would have had a perfect season if they didn't mess up their Champions League campaign. Now, after signing Zachary, they are an even much stronger team. They have some of the most creative midfielders in Europe at this moment. There's the ever-creative duo of Zachary and Andrea Pirlo. Then, there's the ever-consistent support of either Claudio Marchisio or Arturo Vidal. All these guys shouldn't lose against Atlético Madrid unless Massimiliano Allegri messes up big time."

"I'm with Alessandro on this point," Joshua Morales, the other pundit, chimed in. "Atlético Madrid will likely start with the midfield combination of Koke, Núñez, Mendes, and probably Antoine Griezmann as an attacking pivot. Of course, all these are very tactical and skilled players in Europe. But against the midfield combination of Zachary, Andrea Pirlo, and Claudio or Vidal, they are simply lacking. The best they can manage is to play defensive football while waiting for an opportunity. But I can't picture them helping Atlético Madrid outplay Juventus, especially in midfield."

"You guys all seem sure," Emilia Vasquez said, smiling. "But I still think Atlético Madrid has a high chance of winning the game. The game is in Madrid. Moreover, Atlético Madrid has Diego Simeone, the miracle worker."

"I hear the miracle worker!" Joshua Morales chuckled and shook his head. "Should we have a little bet concerning who'll win the game between Juventus and Atlético Madrid?"

"Sorry, I don't bet," Emilia said. "But I still think Atlético Madrid has a good chance of winning the game..."

Zachary shook his head. He couldn't continue watching after the presenters started some pointless banter among themselves. He was also uncomfortable with watching the pundits put him on a high pedestal due to a single performance.

He picked up the remote and switched the channel. Very soon, he started following Sky Sports news while occasionally thinking about Juventus' upcoming Champions League match against Atlético Madrid.

Diego Simeone, Atlético Madrid's manager, was the type of coach who organized his tactics depending on the opponent. The man often lived off about 35% possession during matches. But even with that little bit of the ball, he would often outclass strong teams tactically and defeat them time and time again. It didn't matter whether a side had Lionel Messi, Cristiano Ronaldo, or Lewandowski. Diego would always try to find a way to win despite the odds against him. And considering all that, Juventus would find it challenging to play against a side managed by such a coach.

"Bzzt Bzzzt! Bzzt Bzzzt!"

Zachary's phone started vibrating from the nearby coffee table while he was still following the Sky Sports news. He leaned forward and scooped it up before glancing at the screen. The next moment, his eyes narrowed with discontent when he realized the call was from an unknown number. But that didn't stop him from accepting the call and placing the phone against his ear.

"Hello," he said, speaking into the phone.

"Hello, to you too," a deep and vigorous voice, colored by a thick accent, sounded from the other end of the line. "I'm Matteo Tavano, a solicitor based in Turin. I acquired your number from Emily Anderson, the agent, and I'm supposed to be aiding you during your purchase of a villa in Pinerolo, Piedmont."

"Oh, Matteo Tavano!" Zachary exclaimed while quickly picking up the remote and lowering the volume of the screen. "Emily told me about you. How're you doing?"

"I'm doing fine," Matteo replied, "It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Zachary."

"No, no, no," Zachary said exaggeratedly, "The pleasure is mine. I really need your help while completing the purchase of the villa."

"Of course," Matteo said with a chuckle. "I'll do my best to offer you the best legal advice money can purchase. But it will cost you."

Zachary chuckled in response. "Emily should have already mentioned the remuneration details when she contacted you. She's the person that usually handles all my financial issues."

"I understand," Matteo said. "I'll discuss with Emily the issue of payment. Now, concerning the villa in question! When can we meet to iron out the arrangements for the property transfer?"

"Today, afternoon. It's my only free day for like the next seven days."

There was a few seconds of silence on the other end of the line before Matteo's voice sounded again. "The afternoon is fine with me. We can meet and travel together to the villa. Then, after seeing it and talking to the sellers, I'll immediately begin the legal process of the property purchase. If all goes well, I should finish all the procedures latest by Thursday. How does that sound?"

"Can't you complete everything sooner?" Zachary asked.

"That's a bit tricky," Matteo said. "You must understand that I'll have to do all the heavy lifting for the settlement, including preparing, reviewing, and lodging all required legal documents, such as the contract of sale and memorandum of transfer. Then, I'll have to deal with any issues related to a property inspection and read the property transfer agreement for any hidden clauses. Finally, I'll conduct a title and certificate search on the property to ensure everything is correct and in order before arranging a settlement between you and the seller. As you can see, I need time to complete all these procedures. Thursday is the best I can do."

"Okay, then," Zachary said. "Let's aim to complete the purchase by Thursday."

"That's for the best," Matteo said. "So, where do we meet up today afternoon?"

"Can you come to the J Hotel?" Zachary asked. "We can meet in the restaurant before traveling to Pinerolo to see the villa."

"What time would you like me to come?" Matteo asked.

"One o'clock," Zachary responded. "Is that fine by you?"

"1:00 PM is okay with me," Matteo said. "Let's meet then."

"Excellent," Zachary responded. "Then, see you later."

As planned, Zachary met up with Matteo Tavano at one o'clock. He was a lean middle-aged man with amber eyes and a receding hairline. He gave off a friendly vibe, and a smile was constantly plastered on his face while he greeted and introduced himself to Zachary.

The two men wasted no time on small talk after exchanging greetings. They immediately started discussing the nature of their business relationship while enjoying some afternoon tea. Their dialogue went well, and thirty minutes later, they traveled to Pinerolo to see the villa. There, they met up with Lorenzo D'Alessandro, the real estate agent in charge of selling the house, and Riccardo Costa, another older gentleman who seemed to be the seller. And from there on, everything was straightforward.

Zachary immediately voiced his intention to purchase the villa at the previously agreed price of 1.8 million Euros. After hearing his declaration, neither Lorenzo nor Ricardo bothered to bargain and hike up the price. They immediately consented to the deal and shook hands with Zachary to complete the initial verbal agreement for the transfer of the property.

They then spent a few minutes discussing and ironing out a few of the more crucial details of the deal under the legal guidance of Matteo Tavano. For instance, they talked about when Zachary would transfer the money for the house and specified when the previous owner would deliver the keys and the ownership papers of the villa. Their talk was fruitful, and they all left happy at dusk after taking another tour around the house and its gardens.

Zachary, on his part, was feeling quite fulfilled as he sat in Angelo's Citroën, heading back to the J Hotel. He was on cloud nine after completing a verbal agreement to purchase a mansion that he could only dream of during his previous life.

All that was left was for Matteo Tavano to conclude the legal end of the deal, and then Zachary would be able to live in the house of his dreams while also playing for one of the biggest clubs in Europe. The notion brightened his spirits, and he returned to his hotel room later that evening with a smile plastered on his face.

Chapter 476 Remorse And Self-Introspection

Zachary was without any worries after leaving the matters of purchasing the villa to Matteo Tavano, the solicitor experienced in handling real estate deals in Turin. He adjusted his mental state and returned his entire focus to training the following day.

As always, he woke up early, at around six, and went through his morning routine. He completed everything he had to do by 8:00 AM and then joined his teammates at the Vinovo, Juventus' training center, to commence preparations for the Champions League game against Atlético Madrid.

His motivation levels were at their best, and he was soon in full gear, training as always to gain tip-top match fitness before Wednesday night. However, that time around, he didn't forget his other responsibilities because of training. He continued attending his language classes and made sure to find time to call Camilla on a daily basis.

Aside from that, Zachary also made time to meet with Emily and Kristin after training on Monday afternoon. They met in a comfy cafe in the middle of Turin and spent a few hours catching up.

Kristin had already settled in well in the new city. She had already enrolled in the University of Turin and was always attending lectures whenever she wasn't handling Zachary's publicity matters. Emily, on her part, was as busy as ever. She had finally registered her own sports agency and was in the process of searching for new talents to represent. All in all, the two ladies seemed to be doing quite well in their respective fields.

Time would always pass by quickly when one was busy. Hours turned into days, and soon, it was Tuesday, the eve of Juventus' Champions League fixture against Atlético Madrid. And as always, Coach Allegri called all the Juventus first-team players into the tactics room late in the evening for the pre-game briefing.

The pre-match briefing proceeded well as Coach Allegri explained the tactics for the game against Atlético Madrid. He clarified everything in Italian while occasionally allowing Maurizio Trombetta, his assistant, to translate some important points into English. Then, after the tactics presentation, it was time to announce the squad heading to Madrid the following morning. And naturally, the coach named the starting eleven first.

Gianluigi Buffon would be in goal, while Giorgio Chiellini, Leonardo Bonucci, and Martín Cáceres would play as the three defenders. Then, in central midfield, it would be Claudio Marchisio, Andrea Pirlo, and Zachary Bemba holding the reigns — while Patrice Evra and Stephan Lichtsteiner would play on the flanks to complete the midfield of five. And finally, Fernando Llorente and Carlos Tévez would play as the two strikers to complete Juventus' 3-5-2 starting formation.

After naming the starting eleven, Coach Allegri then moved on to mention those that were on the bench. And without any surprises, Marco Storari, Angelo Ogbonna, Rômulo, Arturo Vidal, Kingsley Coman, Sebastian Giovinco, and Álvaro Morata were the names on the coach's list of substitutes. All those players had trained well over the past two days, and it was natural that they make his squad for the Champions League game against Atlético Madrid.

The naming of the line-up marked the end of the pre-game tactics meeting. As a result, the coach sent the players back to their homes to rest after repeatedly reminding them to be on time the following morning.

Their flight to Madrid was at 8:30 early in the morning. So, they had to arrive at Juventus' training center by 7:30 AM so they would have time to travel to the airport by bus.

After leaving Juventus' training center in the evening, Zachary returned to his room at the J Hotel. After cleaning up, he enjoyed a room-delivered dinner before brushing his teeth and jumping into bed. He

was ready to enter into a peaceful slumber — and in so doing, allow his body to rest and be in the best shape for the following day's game against Atlético Madrid.

But sometimes, things would not proceed according to plan, and that night was as such for Zachary. He received an unexpected call just after entering between the sheets.

The call was from Camilla, and when he picked it up, his gut feeling immediately warned him that his night wouldn't go according to plan. But even then, he braced himself and decided to listen to what Camilla had to say.

"Hello, Camilla," he spoke into the phone after pressing the accept button. "How is your evening going?"

Zachary was trying to ease into the conversation. However, there was no response from the other end of the line. He could hear someone breathing... maybe Camilla, but she just remained silent. She wasn't saying even a single word!

"Hello, Camilla," he spoke again, sitting upright on the bed. "Are you there? Are you okay?"

"Hello, Zach," Camilla finally responded in a somewhat unnatural voice. She seemed to be sobbing.

"Are you okay?" Zachary asked again, his mind sobering up and losing all signs of sleep. He was worried.

"I'm really not okay," Camilla responded in between sobs after a few more seconds.

"What's the matter?" Zachary pressed, switching the phone to his other ear. He softened his tone and continued, "What's wrong?" please visit

"I lost the child," she responded with almost a whisper.

"What?"

"I said I lost the child," she said. "After I came back from work, I started doing some laundry. But that's when I got sudden cramps and abdominal pains and realized I was bleeding. I called an ambulance, and it rushed me to the hospital, only to find out I had had a miscarriage.

"Oh!" Zachary's mind blanked out after hearing her narrative. And for a few seconds, he didn't know what to say. His thoughts were muddled and all over the place.

He was confused as he should have been relieved after hearing such news. He should have felt relaxed as he had not been ready to have a child, especially at that early stage of his football career. However, the reality at that moment was totally different from what he expected. What he felt was the opposite of what he'd envisioned after hearing such unfortunate news.

The artificial lighting in the hotel room cast a glow upon his face, highlighting his listless expression. In the meantime, a sensation of emptiness flooded his mind, making him feel like he had lost something important. He regretted not treating Camilla right when he heard the news of her pregnancy.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled into the phone after collecting himself.

"You don't have to apologize," Camilla replied in a more relaxed tone. "It wasn't your fault. It just happened."

Zachary was at a loss for words after hearing that. He thought for a few seconds before asking, "Where are you now? Are you okay? Do you have any other complications?"

"I'm still at the hospital. But I have no other complications. At least the doctors haven't found any. Zachary! I have to go now. The doctors are here. They have to conduct more tests. We'll talk later." After saying that, she immediately ended the call before Zachary could respond.

Zachary sighed and immediately dropped the phone by his side. The sudden news from Camilla had caused his mood to sink and wallow in a whirlpool of wondering what could have been. He could finally relate to the saying - you only know how valuable something is after losing it.

The reality of losing a potential offspring hit him, and he couldn't help but sink into a period of self-introspection. He sat there on his bed, staring blankly at the opposite wall. And naturally, moments of his time in Turin flashed through his thought center, and he occasionally shook his head. He regretted a few things.

Ever since making his move to Juventus — no, that's not right. Ever since his grandma died, he had stopped being down-to-earth in everything he did. For instance, he wasn't training as much as he had during his initial days at Rosenborg. Additionally, he'd started putting money above everything else, including his love for football. He was even thinking of finding a way out of his contract with Nike in order to score a more juicy deal with another sportswear manufacturer. He'd somehow lost track of his goals along the way, thinking he would achieve greatness by exerting minimum effort, especially with the system as support. But that wasn't the end of his poor conduct.

There was also his lackluster treatment of Camilla, especially when he heard about the news of her pregnancy. He didn't comfort her or try his best to be there for her. He was unfeeling as he'd only thought about how Camilla's situation might mess up the progress of his career.

He'd forgotten the values his late grandma had instilled in him while growing up and become a total jackass. He hadn't acted as a real man and accepted his responsibilities. And now, it seemed like the ever-present karma had finally slapped him on the cheek due to his transgressions. As a result, he received the unfortunate news that sent him into a whirlpool of regret and self-introspection. Moreover, that was on the eve of the game against Atlético Madrid.

"It's not too late," Zachary mumbled to himself. "I can readjust and become a better person. I can become someone who makes my grandma in heaven proud. But first, I need to find out if Camilla is doing okay. I must make amends. I must apologize. I must be there for her this time around."

Zachary geared himself. He picked up his phone again and dialed her number. The dial tone sounded within his ear, and then the international call connected. But alas, she didn't pick up. It seemed like she was still going through medical tests, even that late in the evening.

"I should wait a bit," Zachary thought, checking the time on his phone screen. It was coming to ten in the night. So, he could wait one more hour before trying her number again.

The waiting time passed by slowly since he was a bit nervous. Eleven o'clock finally arrived, and he tried calling Camilla again. But once again, she didn't pick, causing him even more worries.

"I'll talk to her tomorrow."

Zachary decided to go to bed as he had to play an important match the following evening. After washing his face, he went in between the sheets, praying and hoping he would sink into a peaceful slumber in a few minutes. But as his mind was not in the right place, sleep didn't come to him until late in the wee hours of the morning.

Chapter 477 A Talk With The Coaches

Zachary woke up to the sound of his phone's alarm the following morning. As his slumber lifted, he opened his eyes, eager to take in the growing brightness of the rising sun. However, the next moment, he felt a sensation of tiredness creep all over him. His every eyelash seemed to weigh more than it should, while the gravity acting on his body appeared to have multiplied by a factor of ten overnight.

After spending hours worrying about Camilla's situation, he'd only managed to find sleep around 3:00 AM the previous night. Thus, his head was still foggy and yearning for more hours of rest. But as a professional footballer, he couldn't give in to that temptation, especially since he had to prepare and head to the Vinovo as soon as possible. Otherwise, he might miss the team bus to the airport and, in so doing, miss the opportunity to partake in Juventus' Champions League match against Atlético Madrid.

"What time is it?" He wondered while scooping up his phone from the bedside table. He glanced at the screen and immediately learned it was thirty-five minutes past six in the morning. He could thus relax since he still had close to an hour to prepare and get to the Vinovo.

"Oh right," Zachary thought, sitting upright on the bed, "I should try Camilla's number before anything else. Hope she picks."

He immediately dialed Camilla's number before holding the phone against his ear. The anxiety from the previous night came flooding back to him as the dial tone sounded. But he took a deep breath to calm himself down and continued waiting. He forced himself to remain patient until Camilla's voice sounded from the other end of the line.

"Hello," she said, sounding a bit sleepy.

"Hello, Camilla," Zachary responded, "How are you today? Are you already out of the hospital?"

"I'm okay, but still in the hospital. The doctors insisted on conducting a few more tests before discharging me."

"That should be good news. Right?"

"Honestly, I don't know. I have to wait for the results from the medical tests to understand my condition."

"Oh, I see," Zachary said and turned silent. He waited a few seconds before continuing, "I'm sorry to hear about your condition. And more than anything, I'm sorry I can't be there for you at this trying moment."

"I understand," she replied, "There's no need for apologies. I know you can't be away from the club, especially with all the matches coming up. And by the way, don't you have a game against Atlético Madrid today?"

"Yes, I do," Zachary responded.

"Are you ready?"

"I'm not sure. But I guess I'll manage."

"Why aren't you sure?" She asked. "Where's the ever-confident Zachary?"

"How can I be in top condition after knowing about your circumstances? I'm not a robot, you know."

Camilla chuckled. "You don't have to worry. I feel fine. I'll most likely be out of the hospital by noon today. So, focus, and prepare for your game. Don't get distracted. I'll feel guilty if you play poorly just because of me."

"I'll try to do my best," Zachary promised and continued conversing with Camilla. They exchanged more small talk for a few more minutes before they ended the call on a positive note.

"That went well," Zachary mumbled and placed the phone to the side before jumping out of bed. He was soon in autopilot mode, going through his morning yoga routine, then washing up and having breakfast before exiting his hotel room with his suitcase in tow. He boarded Angelo's Citroën a few minutes later, and the two of them commenced their short journey to the Vinovo.

Zachary's spirits had brightened up again after his phone call with Camilla. Even after not sleeping for almost the entire night, he was ready to head to Madrid, Spain, with his teammates and partake in Juventus' Champions League game. At least, that was what he thought despite his weary appearance.

Under the gentle glow of the just-risen sun, Coach Allegri's face was all smiles as he watched his players assemble in front of the team bus in the Vinovo's parking lot. He could tell that his starting eleven and substitutes were in good condition with one sweep of his experienced and discerning gaze. They all seemed to have rested well and were ready to head to Madrid and battle the tricky Atlético Madrid side.

"These players are really disciplined," he thought as he continued observing the players. His gaze darted around the place, passing over Andrea Pirlo, Arturo Vidal, Buffon, and the other players. He was trying to ensure that all his starting eleven and substitutes were okay. But just then, he spotted someone sitting on the ground close to the railing demarcating the parking lot. When the coach focused, he realized that Zachary was the person in question, and he seemed fast asleep while leaning on the railing.

"Che cazzo..." The coach couldn't help but mumble a few expletives in his native Italian language. His eyebrows involuntarily knitted together, and he stepped through the crowd of players, heading towards Zachary. The glint in his eyes grew fiercer as he walked forward, and naturally, all the players made way for him. They didn't even dare to wake up their sleeping teammate as they seemed to fear the wrath of their coach.

"Zachary..." Coach Allegri yelled after finally reaching the young Maestro. "Zachary?" He shook him awake.

Zachary slowly opened his eyes the next moment. For a few seconds, he glanced about him, seemingly out of his wits. He was obviously still trying to escape the comforting sensation of his sweet and peaceful slumber.

"Zachary!" Coach Allegri shouted again.

"Yes, coach," Zachary replied almost by instinct that time around. He shook his head as if to clear his head — and immediately focused on the coach standing before him.

"Why do you seem like a person who didn't sleep yesterday night?" Coach Allegri asked in Italian while keeping his scorching gaze on Zachary's face. "Are you okay?"

In response, Zachary blanked out for a moment and turned to his teammates for help.

"Oh, damn it!" Coach Allegri sighed. "I forgot that he doesn't speak Italian." He turned to Maurizio Trombetta, his assistant, and said, "Coach Trombetta! Tell him to follow me. I need to talk to him before we depart for Madrid."

"Okay, I'll notify him," Coach Trombetta readily agreed. Without further ado, he approached Zachary and relayed the coach's instructions. His English was fluent, and he made sure that Zachary understood that the coach wanted to talk to him immediately.

Silence reigned supreme as Zachary followed the two coaches out of the parking lot. The rest of the Juventus players didn't say a word as they watched his receding back with weird gazes. It was only when his silhouette disappeared inside one of the buildings of the training center that they resumed their conversations. And naturally, the main topic of discussion was Zachary's strange behavior that morning.

"So," Fernando Llorente was among the first to break the silence. "What was up with Zachary?" He asked Evra.

"I don't know," Evra replied. "But if I may guess, he might just have been taking a small nap before the journey. I don't understand why the coach is making a big deal out of it."

"A small nap!" Fernando said, his tone skeptical. "He seemed so totally out of it. The coach had to shake him awake several times before he regained his senses."

"Indeed, that's strange," Evra said. "And I don't get why he didn't wait for us to board the plane before taking his nap. He would have avoided the coach's scrutiny that way."

"I think there is something wrong with him," Fernando supplied.

"Let's hope that's not the case," Andrea Pirlo, who was nearby, chimed in abruptly. "We need him to be okay. We need him in the evening against Atlético Madrid."

"True," Evra said. "Let's hope that he's okay."

In the meantime, Zachary was already facing the coaches in one of the tactics rooms at the Vinovo. Despite his circumstances, he was relaxed since he was sure he hadn't done anything wrong.

"Okay, Zachary," Coach Trombetta was the first to break the silence in the room. "We're just checking. Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine," Zachary replied with a smile.

"Then, why were you fast asleep in the parking lot?" Coach Trombetta followed up with another question. "You seemed like you hadn't slept a wink in weeks. Why is that?"

Zachary thought for a moment and sighed. He took a deep breath and told the two coaches about the unfortunate news he'd received from Camilla yesterday night. He also mentioned how he couldn't sleep afterward with the intent to ensure they understood his circumstances clearly.

"I'm sorry to hear about your girlfriend," Coach Trombetta said after hearing his tale. Without further ado, he turned towards Coach Allegri and started translating Zachary's words. He spewed rapid Italian sentences for about a minute before turning to Zachary once again.

"So, Zachary," Coach Trombetta articulated, "We now understand your circumstances. And we must ask: Can you still feature in today's game against Atlético Madrid? Or do you need time to recover from this setback?"

"I think I'm ready to play," Zachary replied.

"You think, or you know?" Coach Trombetta pressed. "This is an important match. We can't mess it up."

Zachary thought for a moment and said, "As long as I sleep during the day, I'm sure I'll be able to perform in the evening."

"At a hundred percent?" Coach Trombetta asked again.

"I'm not sure about the hundred percent," Zachary admitted. "I can only answer that after stepping onto the pitch."

Coach Trombetta nodded and turned towards Coach Allegri. The two men then wasted no time immersing themselves in what seemed like another heated conversation in Italian. And finally, after about a minute, they seemed to come to an understanding and returned their focus to Zachary.

"So," Coach Trombetta said, "Coach Allegri has made a bold suggestion that will allow you to have a maximum impact against Atlético Madrid even if you're not at the top of your game. Do you want to hear it?"

"Of course," Zachary replied.

"You play as a striker in today's game," Coach Trombetta continued. "As a striker, you won't have to expend as much energy as you usually do while playing midfield. Your role will only be to apply pressure on Atlético Madrid's center-backs with just your presence while waiting for an opportunity. That way,

you will be able to relax during most of the game and only spring into action when the ball comes your way."

"Do I have a choice in this matter?" Zachary asked.

"No, you don't," Coach Trombetta said, not mincing words. "Since you're not in your best condition, we prefer that you remain far away from our goal. We don't want to see you lose the ball close to our box due to a lapse in concentration. That would hurt us a great deal."

"Okay, I understand," Zachary said, taking a deep breath. "I'll follow your suggestion and play on the striking line today. Is there anything else?"

"No," Coach Trombetta responded. "You can now rejoin your teammates. But remember to get some sleep during the journey. Otherwise, we won't let you off if you mess up terribly during the game. Understood?"

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

"Good." Coach Trombetta smiled and nodded. "Return to the bus. We'll be setting off for the airport in a few minutes."

"Okay," Zachary said and stood up. He nodded to the coaches before marching out of the room.

Naturally, Zachary couldn't help but think carefully about the actions of the two coaches while on his way back to the parking lot. They had been too eager to summon him just for the simple reason of sleeping before the journey. And then, they used his poor condition that morning as a convenient excuse to push him on the striking line. It was as if they had long thought about playing him in that position for the game against Atlético Madrid.

"The position doesn't matter at this point," Zachary thought. "I only need to ensure that I make a substantial impact on the pitch wherever I play. That's what's important." He geared himself up and immediately quickened his steps, eager to rejoin his teammates in the parking lot.

Chapter 478 To The Vicente Calderón Stadium

The Juventus squad's journey from Turin to Madrid was without any issues that morning. As planned, the Old Lady players and technical staff were on the 8:30 outbound flight from Turin. They spent two and a half hours in the skies before their plane descended and touched down on the runway of the famous Madrid–Torrejón Airport.

Coach Allegri was the first to set foot on Madrid soil. After breathing in to take in the calming Madrid breeze, he smiled and nodded to the nearby staff before turning to face the UEFA guide in charge of Juventus.

"I'm Pablo Rodríguez, your guide for this UEFA Champions League trip to Madrid," the middle-aged man said, extending his hand. "Welcome to Madrid. Welcome to the capital of European football, Coach Allegri."

"You're funny." Coach Allegri chuckled, taking Pablo's hand for a firm handshake. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Pablo. But I'll pretend as if I didn't hear you call Madrid the capital of European football. Is our bus ready?"

Pablo smiled in response. "Yes, the bus is waiting in the parking lot. It is ready to ferry you to your hotel. We've also already handled the airport procedures in your stead. So you don't need to go through the hustle of airport lines."

"Thank you, Pablo," Coach Allegri said before turning back to face his players, who had already assembled behind him. With one glance, he could see signs of dullness and lethargy among their ranks. The short journey had worn them out, and they needed intensive exercise before returning to tip-top condition.

"Lads!" The coach said in Italian. "Here is our plan for today. We'll head to the hotel and enjoy a light breakfast. After that, all of us, except the sleepyhead Zachary, will go through some drills to warm up our muscles. We'll end our short training session at around 1:30 PM and then have lunch. Then, after lunch, we'll rest until 6:30 in the evening before having dinner and then heading to the Vicente Calderón Stadium for our game against Atlético Madrid. Understood?"

"Yes, coach," the players who could speak Italian replied in unison.

"Excellent," the coach said, nodding. "You can translate my message to your teammates who don't speak Italian. In the meantime, let's start making our way to the bus. We must hurry and put in a few hours of training before lunch."

With that said, the Juventus squad followed after Pablo, the UEFA guide, and they made their way out of the airport through a private exit. In a few minutes, they reached the arranged team bus and boarded it. Then after they all took their seats, the driver eased the bus out of the parking lot, and off they went, heading towards the Arganzuela district of Madrid, Spain. They were obviously on their way to the Riu Plaza España, the hotel which would be their home during their one-day stay in Madrid.

Madrid was, without a doubt, a beautiful city. It was a metropolis of elegant boulevards, expansive and well-manicured parks, plus breathtaking architecture. But all that couldn't intrigue Coach Allegri as he had already been to Madrid more times than he could remember. He also couldn't afford to waste time as he was still refining his game plan for the Champions League game against Atlético Madrid.

He had done his best to prepare his players over the past two days of training at the Vinovo. He'd also done the necessary to increase Juventus' attacking prowess by pushing the overly-clinical Zachary to the striking line. Everything was in order, and all that remained was to ensure that his other starting eleven were in tip-top shape so they could adequately execute his game plan during the match.

"Coach!" Maurizio Trombetta, his assistant, called from beside him.

"Yes," Coach Allegri replied.

Coach Trombetta glanced around before saying, "Fernando is not happy after you abruptly took him out of the starting line-up. He has been grumbling to the rest of his teammates throughout the journey."

"Just let him be," Coach Allegri said with a dismissive wave of his hand. "I already explained to him that I made the switch for tactical reasons. He'll calm down after some time. That aside, you should ensure that Zachary gets some sleep during the day. We want him sharp during the game."

"I know," Coach Trombetta nodded. "I'll ensure he gets some rest when the others are training."

Coach Allegri nodded and returned his gaze to the scenery flashing outside of the bus window. He didn't say another word until the bus arrived at the Hotel Riu Plaza España.

After enjoying a late breakfast at the Hotel Riu Plaza España's restaurant, Zachary parted with his teammates. He went straight to his hotel room and changed into some lighter clothes. After switching off his phone, he jumped into bed and was soon fast asleep.

Unlike the previous night, his sleep was a peaceful one. He was deep in slumber for a good few hours and only managed to open his eyes when the clock hand was pointing to the three o'clock mark in the evening.

He stretched before jumping out of bed. As his body moved, his spirits brightened, and he felt full of energy. Gone was the tiredness of the morning, and his mind was so relaxed without any ounce of fatigue. A smile framed his facial features as he casually executed a set of yoga poses in his hotel room. He was focused on the exercising routine for a few minutes and only stopped when a few drops of sweat started dripping down his forehead.

"Now, I'm truly ready," Zachary thought. He'd been worried about messing up during the match due to fatigue. But after sleeping for a few hours, those concerns were all gone. He was in the best shape he could be and ready to execute his magic against the Atlético Madrid boys.

"I wonder if Camilla is out of the hospital."

Zachary immediately picked up his phone from the bedside table. He switched it on, hoping to dial Camilla's number and understand her circumstances. But right after the phone booted up, his eyes widened when he saw a message from her.

"Hello, dear," the message read. "Just wanted to inform you that I'm out of the hospital. The tests revealed that I'm very okay. So you don't have to worry about me. You can focus on preparing for your match without any worries. Love, Camilla."

After reading the message, Zachary felt like he'd unloaded another weight off his shoulder. He smiled and immediately typed a response, making sure to make her understand that he was thinking about her. Then, he threw the phone on the bed before heading to the bathroom for a shower.

"Knock! Knock!"

A loud knock sounded on his hotel room's door just as he stepped out of the shower. He wrapped a towel around himself and immediately walked towards the door. He opened it, only to find Coach Trombetta standing in the doorway.

"Hello, Zachary," Coach Trombetta said, stepping past Zachary and into the room. It was as if he was entering his own house. "Did you manage to find some sleep?" He asked.

"Yes, I did," Zachary replied with a smile. "I have just woken up." He closed the door behind him.

"That's good." Coach Trombetta smiled. "How are you feeling now?"

"I'm in good condition," Zachary responded. "Now, I'm sure I'll be able to perform at a hundred percent. Can you return me to the midfield?"

"Don't push your luck," Coach Trombetta said. "The coach has already been lenient enough by allowing you to stay in the starting eleven. Don't try to dictate what position he plays you in."

"I understand," Zachary said.

"Good." Coach Trombetta nodded with a smile. "You should head downstairs and eat something. You'll need plenty of nutrients and calories to burn during the match."

"I was just planning to," Zachary said. "I'll head down for a meal in about fifteen minutes."

"Then, my work here is done," the coach said, standing up. "I'll see you again when we're setting off for the stadium. Don't be late." Without waiting for Zachary's response, he marched out of the room before closing the door behind him.

The time passed quickly, and soon, the sun sank below the western horizon of the city of Madrid. And just before the clock hand could point to the eight o'clock mark, both teams arrived at the Vicente Calderón Stadium one after the other.

Despite being the away side, Juventus arrived first. Under the insistence of their head coach, Massimiliano Allegri, they ignored the fans and rushed into the stadium, eager to begin their pre-match warm-up routine.

The Atlético Madrid delegation then arrived after a few more minutes and caused a big hoo-ha at the gates. The home fans started screaming the names of the Atlético Madrid players as they alighted from the bus. Some were even bold enough to ask for an autograph from Diego Simeone, Atlético Madrid's coach.

Diego Simeone, being the charismatic guy he was, was enthusiastic as ever while facing the Atlético Madrid supporters. He signed a few autographs before leading his players into the stadium. They walked quickly through the tunnel and arrived in their dressing room within a few minutes.

Coach Diego Simeone immediately instructed his players to hurry up and prepare for the pre-match dynamic warm-up. Then, he stepped towards his assistant and asked, "Has Juventus released their line-up yet?"

"Let me check," Germán Burgos, the assistant coach, replied. Then, he browsed for information on his tablet for a few seconds before turning to his boss again. "Their line-up is out."

"Good," Diego Simeone said. "Let me see."

Without waiting for the assistant to respond, he grabbed the tablet and focused his eyes on Juventus' line-up. The next moment, his expression turned serious when he noticed that Coach Allegri had chosen

to play Zachary on striking. His mind went into overdrive, and he recalled many scenes from Zachary's past match videos. But even after contemplating for a while, he still couldn't gauge whether Zachary would do more harm upfront than he usually did while playing in the midfield. Additionally, he was at a loss for how to defend against his trickery close to their box.

"This is going to be tricky," he said to his assistant. "After preparing many strategies to handle Zachary in midfield, this bastard has chosen to play him on striking. Damn it. Why is he playing him out of his natural position?"

"But they are still playing a 3-5-2 formation," Germán Burgos, the assistant coach, pointed out. "Zachary won't have any impact up front as long as we play a solid game and prevent the Juventus midfielders from supplying him the ball."

"That may not be so," Diego Simeone said. "The guy is tall and as slippery as a loach. He might punish us by connecting with crosses and long balls to score goals. We must keep reminding the defenders to be on their toes while marking him."

Chapter 479 Against Atlético Madrid

The cheers around the Vicente Calderón Stadium hit a thunderous crescendo when the clock hands all around Madrid pointed to the 8:38 PM mark. Under the expectant gazes of the more than 40,000 supporters in the stadium, both teams followed the four match officials and slowly lined up in front of the tunnel.

The Atlético Madrid players were in their official striped red and white home jerseys matched with blue shorts. On the other hand, the Juventus players had donned their rare all-green away kits for that face-off against the Madrid side. They all looked dapper as they went through the pre-match routines before running off into the pitch to take their starting positions.

In the meantime, Coach Allegri also shook hands with Diego Simeone, the tactician who had guided Atlético Madrid to La Liga glory the previous season. Since only a few minutes remained until the commencement of the game, the two coaches only exchanged a few words before stepping back toward their respective technical areas. Then, they took their seats and patiently waited for the game to begin.

After occupying a position on the visitor's bench, Massimiliano Allegri began surveying the pitch. His eyes swept over the referee and then a few of his defenders and midfielders before settling on Zachary. The next moment, the coach's spirits lifted when he noticed that the young number ten was already warming up while assessing the opposition. He seemed as ready as ever to play the game and unleash his impressive skills upon the Atlético Madrid side.

"I really hope he can deliver," Coach Allegri thought. Over the past two weeks, he'd spent countless hours watching Atlético Madrid's previous match videos. His time before the screen was fruitful, and he'd eventually learned how scary Atlético Madrid could be on the defensive. You could dominate them in possession and other statistics, but in the end, they could still have the last laugh and defeat you just by relying on their tenacious defensive abilities. They were a scary team, and that was why Coach Allegri had come up with the idea of playing the overly clinical Zachary on striking.

The coach needed Zachary up front to apply pressure on Atlético Madrid's center-backs and hopefully score a goal or two. He needed the boy wonder's sharpness and clinicality to help Juventus win their first Champions League group stage fixture against Atlético Madrid.

The minutes passed quickly — and soon, the clock hands all around Madrid pointed to the 8:45 PM mark. Without further ado, the referee blew the whistle to kick start that evening's UEFA Champions League game between Atlético Madrid and Juventus.

"It begins."

Since Zachary was the striker, he was positioned over the ball at the center spot and responsible for kicking off the play that evening. After hearing the whistle, he reacted immediately and kicked the ball back into his midfield, hoping to find Andrea Pirlo. He then took off to the other side of the pitch, eager to take up his attacking position.

Andrea Pirlo, on his part, controlled the ball from Zachary with ease. Following that, he whirled around before passing to Claudio Marchisio, one of his counterparts in midfield.

Marchisio was also quick on the ball. He took a single touch while assessing the situation around him. Then, before any of the opponents could close him down, he unleashed a grounded pass toward the wings to find Stephan Lichtsteiner, Juventus' attacking wing-back.

Stephan Lichtsteiner was as impressive as ever on the ball. He controlled it with a single touch and immediately skipped past Koke, one of Atlético Madrid's midfielders. Then, before any other opponent could close him down, he took off and raced along the touchline, spearing deeper into Atlético Madrid's half. When the angle finally opened up, he squared the ball back into the middle to find Andrea Pirlo, the Juventus Maestro, who'd just run into an unmarked pocket of space close to the center line.

Andre Pirlo, on his part, connected with the ball from Stephan Lichtsteiner with ease. But before he could take a second touch, Saúl Ñíguez, one of Atlético Madrid's three midfielders, was on him, all guns blazing.

Saúl Ñíguez was merciless while approaching the Italian maestro. He slid forth wholesale, trying to tackle the ball off Andrea's feet. But his challenge was a bit late, and he missed the ball. Instead, he caught Andrea Pirlo on the ankle and swept him off the ground. He'd obviously committed a dangerous foul in the 2nd minute of gameplay.

"Ref! Foul!"

Arturo Vidal, who was in the vicinity, was the first to yell out after Andrea Pirlo tumbled down and hit the green. The Chilean midfielder rushed to the scene and was soon in the referee's face, complaining about how ruthless Saúl Ñíguez's foul had been. But Vidal wasn't alone while expressing his dissatisfaction with Ñíguez's challenge. The other Juventus players, including Zachary, showed solidarity at that moment. They arrived at the scene and started causing chaos while voicing their complaints. They were obviously exerting pressure upon the referee so he could consider offering a yellow card to Ñíguez.

However, the Juventus players soon realized that they were barking up the wrong tree. Felix Brych, the referee, turned a deaf ear to all their complaints. He only awarded Juventus a free-kick and then waved the medical team onto the pitch to provide first-aid treatment for the seemingly injured Andrea Pirlo. But he didn't bother to show Saúl Ñíguez, the player who had committed the dangerous foul, a yellow card.

"Referee! We're not happy with your decision."

Giorgio Chiellini, the vice-captain, grumbled after the referee refused to show a yellow card to Saúl Ñíguez. The center-back went on another verbal war with the referee while the medics tended to Andrea Pirlo. But once again, the vice captain's complaints fell on deaf ears.

The referee turned away and busied himself with marking out the spot for the free-kick. He was obviously not about to consider Chiellini's complaints.

"Let's ignore the referee and prepare for the free-kick," Zachary suggested, intending to cool down the heated atmosphere around the scene. He pulled Chiellini away from the referee and continued, "It's not good to anger the referee, especially so early in the game. Let's cool down and focus on the game."

"Okay." Giorgio Chiellini nodded. He seemed to have calmed down after voicing his dissatisfaction.

FWEEEEEEE

The referee blew the whistle after the medics finished tending to Andrea Pirlo. Claudio Marchisio immediately took the free-kick short, and Juventus resumed their attack. Over the next few minutes, the football was free flowing as water, as the Old Lady players moved the ball from one end of the field to the other as they tried to stretch Atlético Madrid's defensive shape. They arrayed themselves in their 3-5-2 system as they outplayed the Madrid side and hoarded over 70% of the possession.

The Juventus players with the most touches were obviously Andrea Pirlo, Claudio Marchisio, Arturo Vidal, Patrice Evra, and Stephan Lichtsteiner, who were the five midfielders. They would form triangles and move the ball around the pitch while looking for an opportunity to thread a defense-splitting pass to Zachary and Tévez, the two strikers. And if there were no opportunities, they would instead play the ball into the wings for the wing-backs to deliver crosses into the box. Their versatility was top-notch that evening, and they further cemented Juventus' dominance during the first thirty minutes. But despite their exceptional performance, they still failed to break apart the tenacity of Atlético Madrid during the opening minutes.

The Atlético Madrid players, on their part, were exceptionally disciplined while alternating between a 4-3-3 and a 4-5-1 defensive shape. They remained compact and solid in their approach and didn't allow Juventus to break through their ranks. And if a need arose, they wouldn't hesitate to foul and bring down any Juventus player that tried to penetrate through their defense. They were ruthless individually and as a unit and thus prevented Juventus from scoring an opening goal during the first thirty minutes of gameplay.

But what was surprising was that the referee didn't show any of the Atlético Madrid players a yellow card, no matter how many fouls they committed. First, they fouled Andrea Pirlo during the 2nd minute. Then, they committed other ruthless fouls against Patrice Evra, Carlos Tévez, and Stephan Lichtsteiner. But the referee chose to remain silent and didn't caution them. As a result, they continued pushing the envelope and committing more dangerous tackles since there were no consequences for their actions so far. And that was the other reason they managed to keep Juventus at bay during the first thirty minutes of gameplay.

Zachary, on his part, had been following the coach's instructions to the letter. He had not once tried to fall back and help out his teammates. Instead, he'd positioned himself in the pocket of space between the center-backs while waiting patiently for an opportunity to test Atlético Madrid's keeper.

He hadn't seen much of the ball during the opening thirty minutes, especially since he was always tightly marked by two towering Atlético Madrid center-backs. He was bored and was just like a spectator, watching the rest of his teammates playing one-touch or two-touch football. He really missed playing in the midfield, where he could constantly be at the center of things.

"Oh, no!"

Suddenly, Zachary's heart went on a wild caper within his chest. He let out a silent yelp as he watched Saúl Ñíguez, Atlético Madrid's midfielder, slide in and win the ball from Arturo Vidal close to the halfway line.

At that moment, it was as if all the Atlético Madrid midfielders and attackers had just woken up. They swarmed forward like a pack of wolves while moving the ball quickly among themselves. Their one-two exchanges were lightning-fast and precise, and they managed to tear through Juventus' defense in mere seconds. They arrived in the final third, and the ball naturally found its way to Koke, Atlético Madrid's creative midfielder.

Koke remained composed as he controlled the ball and skipped past Martín Cáceres, one of Juventus' defenders. His impressive footwork and trickery opened a passing angle for him, and he unleashed a simple but deadly ball past the approaching Giorgio Chiellini. He beat the Italian defender with his well-

timed through ball and released Mario Mandzukic, Atlético Madrid's center-forward, on a straight course toward Juventus' goal.

"Whoosh!"

Mario Mandzukic was like the wind as he beat the offside trap and connected with the well-timed pass. He controlled the ball mid-sprint and continued racing toward Juventus' box like there was no tomorrow.

Gianluigi Buffon, the Juventus keeper, reacted as any keeper should. He raced out of goal, hoping to save the situation by intercepting the approaching Mario Mandzukic.

But Mandzukic, being the sharp striker he was, remained composed under such circumstances. He rounded Gianluigi Buffon with a deft touch before burying the ball into the empty net to score Atlético Madrid's 1st goal for the night. Then, without halting, he raced toward the sidelines to celebrate with the rest of his teammates.

Chapter 480 Reaction

"What a sensational finish!" The commentator's mellifluous voice resounded in sync with the thunderous cheers of the home fans around the stadium. "Mario Mandzukic, Atlético Madrid's Croatian center-forward, has scored the opening goal in the 34th minute. It's now Atlético Madrid one and Juventus nil. The Madrid side is ahead even after being on the back foot since the first minute."

"Really incredible stuff!" The co-commentator chimed in. "Juventus has been on the front foot and has dominated over 70% possession for most of the first half. But the Turin-based side still couldn't make anything out of their overwhelming statistics. Instead, it's the team from Madrid that has utilized its first chance on goal to find the back of the net in this highly-contested Champions League group game."

"That's Diego Simeone's Atlético Madrid for you," the commentator said. "You can dominate them in possession and other statistics, but they will still defeat you at the end of the match. That's how they broke Barcelona and Real Madrid's dominance before becoming the champions of Spain last season. They're an incredibly tactically disciplined side under their passionate manager, Diego Simeone."

"That's true," the co-commentator agreed. "I'm sure Coach Allegri should be angry with Arturo Vidal for losing the ball that easily. Had he not lost possession, then Atlético Madrid would have found it hard to create any chance on goal during the first half..."

Paolo Favero, a staunch Juventus fan, was totally dejected while following the Spanish commentary in the visiting fans section of the Vicente Calderón Stadium. He was angry and disappointed as his ears took in the thunderous cheers of the Atlético Madrid fans.

Paolo had traveled all the way from Turin to Madrid — to watch his team put on a show and defeat the weaker Madrid side. Over the past few days, Paolo had constantly visualized Juventus putting three past the Atlético Madrid keeper within the first half an hour of gameplay. But during the 34th minute, his hopes had sunk down the drain after the Atlético Madrid side utilized their first chance on goal to score and gain an advantage during the heated Champions League group battle.

"Why did Coach Allegri play Zachary on striking today?" He grumbled after the cheers died down. "Why did he take him out of our midfield? I don't understand the coach's thinking?"

"I also don't get the coach's thinking," Giovanni Favero, his brother, replied from beside him. "Zachary should be the perfect person to break down Atlético Madrid's midfield. But the coach has played him out of his natural position. It's absurd."

Paolo Favero sighed and nodded while his eyes continued taking in the proceedings on the pitch. The goal celebrations had already ended, and the game had just restarted. Juventus was once again on the ball, playing patient — but short passes.

The Old Lady players were obviously trying to stretch and find a way through Atlético Madrid's 4-5-1 defensive system. They remained confident and passed the ball immaculately among themselves for the next seven minutes. Their teamwork was incredible, and they once again hoarded over 70% ball possession while sustaining pressure on Atlético Madrid's defense. But they still couldn't find a goal-scoring opportunity, despite their relentless efforts. No matter how hard they tried, they couldn't break through Atlético Madrid's tenacious defense.

"I think Juventus is in trouble," Paolo Favero suddenly heard the commentator say. "Their passing is immaculate, and they are again dominating the possession. However, they are still far from breaking down Atlético Madrid and creating goal-scoring opportunities. They haven't involved their strikers in their build-up. Additionally, they have really not tested the Atlético Madrid keeper since the commencement of the game."

"That's right," the co-commentator agreed. "I think Coach Diego Simeone's tactics are spot on today. He has isolated Zachary and Tévez, the two Juventus strikers. And by keeping Andrea Pirlo, Juventus' deep-lying playmaker, in check, he has choked Juventus' transition from midfield to striking. That's why Coach Allegri's men have not managed to penetrate Atlético Madrid's defense. They even haven't had a single shot on target since the commencement of the game. Truly surprising!"

"True," the commentator said. "Let's return to the proceedings on the pitch. It's Patrice Evra on the ball. He races past Raúl García and passes to Claudio Marchisio, the Juventus midfielder. Marchisio is on the ball. He twists and turns away from Koke before passing to Andrea Pirlo."

"Pirlo receives the ball. He controls it and tries to skip past Saúl Ñíguez with his second touch. But, Oh my God! He has been robbed by Ñíguez, and Atlético Madrid wins possession..."

"Damn it!" Paolo Favero's mood sunk. He tightened his fists as he watched Saúl Ñíguez win the ball from Andrea Pirlo with a sliding tackle. Then, before the other Juventus players could react, Ñíguez picked himself from the ground and kicked the ball to Mario Mandzukic to initiate another counter against Juventus.

"It's another counterattack from Atlético Madrid..." The commentator's voice resounded in the stadium as the Atlético Madrid offensive players flew forward. At that moment, they attacked as a unit and exchanged lightning-fast passes. They tore through the field like a pack of wolves — and in a matter of seconds; they were bearing down on Juventus' box.

A second later, the ball found its way back to Mario Mandzukic, who had positioned himself, in an unmarked pocket of space, on the left edge of the box. The Croatian center-forward wasted no time controlling the ball mid-sprint before riffling in a carpet shot toward the bottom left corner.

Zachary, who was in the center circle, was nervous as his eyes followed the ball. With one glance, he could tell that Mario Mandzukic's effort was on target and headed toward the bottom left corner. It was obviously another chance for Atlético Madrid to score and extend their lead.

However, it seemed that the goddess of luck was with Juventus at that instant. Gianluigi Buffon, the Juventus keeper, was alert. He reacted immediately and went into action with an acrobatic dive. He stretched forth and grazed the ball with his fingertips, thus sending it off its intended trajectory.

With that incredible save, the keeper managed to save Juventus from conceding a second goal during the 43rd minute. However, the danger was still at large within Juventus' box. That was because the ball smashed off the post before rebounding back into the box. It immediately induced a scuffle in the area as the players of both teams went after the ball with all the haste they could muster.

But luckily for Juventus, it was Leonardo Bonucci who got the last laugh. The center-back pounced forward like a raging beast and smashed the ball toward the other side of the pitch. His powerful and timely clearance managed to get Juventus out of a precarious situation right before halftime.

"Whoosh!"

Zachary immediately took off after the ball. His almost instantaneous acceleration allowed him to escape from his markers in the center circle. Then, he raced toward the left wing — towards the position of the descending ball as if his life was on the line.

After arriving close to the touchline on the left, he stretched out his leg and brought the ball under control with a deft touch. His immaculate ball control elicited cheers and gasps from the crowd. But he remained focused as he whirled around and accelerated towards Atlético Madrid's box like a bullet train on the rails.

His S+ Agility was on full display as his long strides ate up yards of space, and he stepped into the final third within seconds. But just as he was cutting into the pitch, on a straight course towards Atlético Madrid's goal, he ran into a roadblock in the form of Diego Godín, the opposing center-back.

The center-back was racing forward, all guns blazing, as if he wanted to murder Zachary. However, Zachary didn't choose to tango with the defender. He instead flicked the ball to his right to find Carlos

Tévez, the other Juventus striker. Then, he immediately altered his running course to circumvent the approaching Diego Godín.

Carlos Tévez, on his part, was also quite impressive. He connected with the ball from Zachary mid-sprint and continued racing toward Atlético Madrid's goal like the wind. Then, when the keeper came out of the box to intercept his run, he selflessly squared the ball back to his left to find Zachary, who was running in sync with him.

Zachary was as composed as ever before the goal. He controlled the ball at the edge of the box before smashing it into the back of the empty net with his left foot. Then, without halting, he raced toward the sidelines to celebrate the equalizer for Juventus with his teammates.

"GOAL!" The commentator's voice reverberated across the stadium as Zachary raced to the sidelines to celebrate with his teammates. "Truly sensational! Zachary has linked up with Carlos Tévez to score an equalizer for Juventus during the 44th minute. With lightning-fast exchanges, they have managed to break down Atlético Madrid's tenacity, and the score is now back to square one. It's Atlético Madrid one and Juventus one. What a wonderful game of football!"

"Yes, truly sensational stuff from Juventus," the co-commentator chimed in. "Talk about being clinical! The Juventus strikers are as sharp as ever. They have created something out of nothing. With one opportunity, they have leveled the playing ground again."

"True," the commentator agreed. "It all began with Leonardo Bonucci's clearance. Then, Zachary controlled the ball with perfection before going at the Atlético Madrid defense like mad. He linked up with Tévez to beat the remaining center-back before burying the ball into the back of the net. We've just witnessed Juventus at its best. Truly amazing football!"
