

Greatest 511

Chapter 511 Preparations For The Away Game Against Cagliari

The day after winning the game against Sampdoria, all Juventus' players, coaches, board members, and technical staff turned their attention to the UEFA Champions League Round of Sixteen Draw. They were all anxious to know which team they would face during the next stage of the top European football competition. So, when the clock hands around Turin pointed to the midday mark, most of them settled in front of their screens, eager to find out the results from the draw.

The draw was pretty transparent and straightforward, with two UEFA representatives drawing the seeded teams against the runners-up from the group stages. The officials worked quickly to pick the teams from the pots, and in just twenty minutes, they came out with the list of fixtures for the Round-of-Sixteen knock-out stage, which were as follows:

17 February & 11 March 2014

Paris Saint-Germain (FRA) v Chelsea FC (ENG)

FC Shakhtar Donetsk (UKR) v FC Bayern München (GER)

18 February & 10 March 2014

FC Schalke 04 (GER) v Real Madrid CF (ESP)

FC Basel 1893 (SUI) v FC Porto (POR)

24 February & 18 March 2014

Manchester City FC (ENG) v FC Barcelona (ESP)

Olympiacos FC (GRC) v Borussia Dortmund (GER)

25 February & 17 March 2014

Bayer 04 Leverkusen (GER) v Juventus (ITA)

Arsenal FC (ENG) v AS Monaco FC (FRA)

"This is wonderful!"

Zachary, who had been attentively following the draw from the comfort of his bedroom, let out a breath after learning that Bayer 04 Leverkusen was Juventus' opponent for the round of sixteen. As far as he was concerned, it was a blessing to battle the German-based club rather than facing off against sides like Man City, Paris Saint-Germain, and Arsenal, which were relatively stronger teams in their respective leagues.

As such, Zachary's heart was finally at peace since he was sure that if the Juventus players performed as usual, they would thrash the German-based side home and away and qualify for the quarter-finals. Then he would be a step closer to achieving every player's dream of winning the UEFA Champions League.

After learning the results of the draw, Zachary and his teammates returned their focus to the team training. Under the strict supervision of the coaches, they held full-day sessions at the Vinovo on Tuesday and Wednesday as they prepared for Thursday's away Serie A game against Cagliari Calcio. And when evening arrived on Wednesday, they answered Coach Allegri's summons and headed to the tactics room for the pre-match tactical meeting.

"Good evening to you all," Coach Allegri said when all the players had taken their seats around the tactics room.

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

"I hope everyone is already here," the coach said while glancing around. "Is there anyone who hasn't arrived yet?"

"We're all here, coach," Gianluigi Buffon, the captain, answered on behalf of everyone else. "Except Patrice Evra and Claudio Marchisio, the injured players, the rest of us are all here."

"Good!" Coach Allegri smiled and continued, "Tomorrow evening, we'll face Cagliari Calcio away in Sardinia. It's another tricky game that will test our winning spirit as a team since we'll be playing in front of a very hostile crowd of Cagliari supporters. It's also a game that will test our discipline, character, and ability to focus in the face of all adversity since there's no doubt that the opponents and their supporters will use every means possible to throw us off our rhythm."

"They will intimidate us. They'll play a rough game against us. They will even haul insults at some of our teammates. But no matter what happens, we must not bring ourselves to their level. We must instead remain composed and only focus on winning. We must persevere through whatever they put us through and show them that we're Juventus, a team that can overcome all with the footballing spirit. Are you guys with me?"

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

"Good, I like the spirit," Coach Allegri said and then started presenting the tactics for the game against Cagliari Calcio. He explained how the team would utilize a 4-3-1-2 formation instead of the usual 3-5-2 setup before assigning roles to individual players. He also talked about player movements, pressing techniques, and marking strategies before ending his one-hour address by reading out the match squad.

All the usual suspects, including Zachary, Andrea Pirlo, Giorgio Chiellini, Leonardo Bonucci, Stephan Lichtsteiner, Fernando Llorente, and Carlos Tévez, made the starting eleven. The only missing names on the squad were, of course, the injured Patrice Evra and Claudio Marchisio.

"Tomorrow," Coach Allegri said with a smile, "we plan to set off from the Vinovo at 9:00 AM by bus. We'll head to the airport and take an eleven o'clock flight to Cagliari. So, I expect every player on the line-up to arrive in the parking lot of the Vinovo by 8:30 AM. Understood?"

"Yes, coach," the players replied in chorus.

"Good." Coach Allegri nodded. "Since we're on the same page, let me wish you a good night. But please remember to get ample rest today. I want you all at the top of your game tomorrow. Understood?"

"Yes, coach," the players replied.

"You can all go now," Coach Allegri said. "However, Zachary, please stay back for a moment. We would like to have a small chat with you."

"He doesn't speak Italian," Coach Trombetta reminded from the side.

"Oh, shit!" Coach Allegri exclaimed. "Okay, convey my words to him. We must chat with him before he departs."

"Okay, I'll do that," Coach Trombetta agreed before walking towards Zachary's seat.

Zachary, who was almost dying of boredom due to his non-mastery of Italian, quickly learned from Coach Trombetta that the coaches wanted to talk to him. Without hesitating, he answered their summons and followed them to Coach Allegri's office within the Vinovo. The three of them then quickly took their seats, and their meeting began.

"So, Zachary," Coach Trombetta said after exchanging a few words with Coach Allegri in Italian. "How far with the language studies? Are you close to mastering Italian?"

Zachary smiled ruefully and said, "Not yet. I can exchange greetings and speak a few sentences. But I still can't understand the meanings behind Coach Allegri's long pre-match addresses. Unless someone else translates for me, I won't comprehend anything."

"Baby steps are still steps," Coach Trombetta encouraged. "So, as long as you're making progress, no matter how small, that's fine."

"Thanks for the encouragement, coach."

"Anyways," Coach Trombetta said, "we wanted to chat with you about what you may have to put up with during the match tomorrow. Are you aware of the reputation of the Cagliari supporters?"

"There are reports that they can be racist at times," Zachary answered. As a staunch football fan during his previous life, he'd obviously heard about the famous incident between Romelu Lukaku and the Cagliari fans. So, he was vaguely aware of how the supporters from Sardinia could behave during matches.

"The bad news is that those reports are indeed correct," Coach Trombetta said with a sigh. "Some Cagliari fans will do anything to help their team win. At their core, they are really not bad people. They might also not be racist. But when their team is facing off against a player as incredibly skilled as you, they will use certain ways to help their team win. Those 'ways' can include hurling racial insults at you, hoping to make you nervous, or throw you off your rhythm."

"The reason we're telling you this is to prepare you for tomorrow," the coach continued. "Of course, we will do everything possible as a club to get a fair playing environment for you tomorrow. We're also working with the Cagliari officials to ensure that the match proceeds smoothly. But as you know, we can't control every supporter in the stadium. So, if the booing and racial insults begin, don't try to take on the fans, as that will encourage them to become more rampant with their abuse. You can force yourself to focus on the game and answer them by playing well against them. Or you could signal us to take you off, and then we'll handle the incident administratively. Is that okay?"

"Okay," Zachary said with a sigh. "To be honest, I've never faced racial discrimination before. The football community in Norway was very welcoming to all, and no one would go around hurling racial insults during football games. So, I don't know what to expect or how I'll feel when the scenario you've presented occurs. But I can still promise not to focus on the fans but on the game. I should be able to achieve that as long as the on-pitch Cagliari players don't join in on the hurling of insults."

"Good," Coach Trombetta said with a smile. "You should also understand that the best way to counter someone trying to offend you is to ignore them completely. For instance, when the Cagliari fans insult you, and you continue playing as usual, they'll realize that they are just barking up the wrong tree. And most likely, they'll stop the insults. But if you start throwing tantrums or hurling insults back at them, they will think that their strategy to throw you off your game is working, and they'll increase their

booing. So, you have to try your utmost to ignore everything off the pitch. That's the way to go during tomorrow's match. Understood?"

"I understand, coach," Zachary said. "As I said, I'll try to focus only on the game. So, don't worry."

Chapter 512 Crisis After Crisis

The following morning, Zachary woke up early, at around six, and enjoyed a sumptuous breakfast prepared by Inger, his professional chef. Then, he spent about thirty minutes meditating in the quiet environment afforded by his bedroom to clear his mind before cleaning up and donning a brand-new Juventus tracksuit.

Minutes later, just as the first rays of the just-risen sun started to stream through the shy gap between the window curtains, he exited his bedroom and descended the stairs. With a measured pace, he headed to the dining room, intending to say his goodbyes to the other occupants of his villa.

Quickly walking through the door to the dining room, he found Bjørn Peters, his fitness trainer, enjoying breakfast with Inger, his wife, at the dining table. As for Jaslene - his newly-hired maid, she was busy dusting the seats around the bar and coffee area beyond the far side of the dining room.

Turning his gaze away from the maid, he smiled at Bjørn Peters. "How's your morning, coach?" He asked, flashing his fitness trainer a smile. "Did you sleep well?"

"I slept like a baby," the coach replied. "How about you? Are you ready to face off against Cagliari Calcio today evening?"

"Yes, I'm," Zachary replied, his voice brimming with confidence. He then spent a few more minutes exchanging more small talk with Bjørn and Inger before exiting the house through the side entrance.

Three days ago, Audi officials in Italy had finally sent over his new Audi RS 7. It wasn't anything as flashy as a Lamborghini or a Ferrari. But it was still a glittering white machine with outrageous performance, impressive refinement, and surprising practicality.

Smiling slightly, Zachary unlocked the Audi and placed his gym bag in the boot. Then, he went around the car and opened the front door before settling his tall frame within the spacious driver's seat.

With expert ease, he started it up, and the engine came alive the next moment. He eased it out of his estate, and a few minutes later, he joined the spacious roads of Turin and started making his way toward the Vinovo.

Zachary maintained a velocity of around seventy to eighty km/hour, hoping to make it to the training center before 8:30 AM, which was the agreed-upon time for the team to convene before heading to Sardinia for the game against Cagliari Calcio. But just as he was rounding another roundabout along the Via Moncalieri route, he drew the ire of the traffic police after missing a speed limit sign. As such, he had to park his car by the roadside and answer the questions of the law enforcers for a good 20-plus minutes before continuing on his way.

He arrived safely at the Vinovo fifteen minutes later. However, since he'd wasted almost half an hour talking to the traffic police, he was late by about eight minutes. So, his teammates and most coaches had already boarded the bus that would ferry them to the airport by the time he made it to the parking lot. Only Maurizio Trombetta, the assistant coach in charge of the first team, and the three medical personnel were yet to board. They were anxious and looking around as if they were waiting for someone, that someone possibly being himself.

"Zachary! There you are!" Coach Maurizio Trombetta exclaimed when he spotted Zachary. "We were just about to depart without you. Why the hell are you late?"

Zachary sighed and told the assistant coach how he'd wasted time talking to the traffic police on his way to the Vinovo. Then, he apologized for being late before asking the coach whether he could board the team bus.

"Of course, you can board the bus," Coach Trombetta said with a sigh. "However, as you know, the head coach is a person that is strict on timekeeping principles. He has already removed your name from the starting eleven, and you'll have to start from the bench today evening."

"But I was only late by about eight minutes..." Zachary tried to argue. He was, of course, not happy after being dropped from the starting eleven.

However, Coach Trombetta stopped him with a simple dismissive gesture. "Zachary!" The assistant coach said. "We all agreed that we had to arrive by 8:30 AM today. But for whatever reason, you arrived late. So, tell me! Do you want us to turn a blind eye to your being late? Do you wish for us to ignore the team rules and allow you to remain in the starting line-up? And let's say we do just that: What happens when another player arrives late in the future? Will we follow the same example and let that player go unpunished?"

On hearing the coach's barrage of questions, Zachary was at a loss for words. He could only remain quiet as he knew that he was the one in the wrong.

"Zachary!" Coach Trombetta continued. "I'm sorry to say: But for this game, you'll have to start on the bench. It's your punishment for arriving late. Okay?"

"Okay, I understand," Zachary replied, sighing heavily. But he didn't say anything more, as that would be totally meaningless.

After spending more than four months at the club, he had already learned that Coach Allegri would rarely change his mind after making a decision. So, Zachary was better off remaining quiet rather than challenging the coaching committee's abrupt decision to bench him. Additionally, by silently taking the punishment, he would maintain the team's harmonious atmosphere and increase Juventus' chances of winning the match against Cagliari Calcio.

"It's good that you understand," Coach Trombetta said with a slight smile. "You can board the bus and join the rest of your teammates. We'll be setting off for the airport in a few minutes."

"Okay, coach," Zachary replied and boarded the team bus. He then greeted a few of his teammates before settling in one of the seats towards the back.

Later that morning, at around half past ten, the Juventus squad arrived in Cagliari, Sardinia, by plane. After resting for about an hour and having a late morning snack in a cafe, they went through a super-light training session at one of the training grounds in Cagliari before enjoying a highly-nutritious meal selected by the team dieticians. Then, after lunch, they checked into a local hotel and rested for a good four hours before heading to the Stadio Sant'Elia, ready to face off against the tricky Cagliari Calcio side.

On arriving at the stadium gates, they received a heartwarming welcome from the crowd of traveling Juventus supporters, who were eager to get close to the players. However, as the squad was tight on time, the Juventus players didn't stop to sign autographs or take pictures with the excited fans. Instead, they just waved to the supporters before continuing on into the stadium.

A few minutes later, the Juventus squad arrived in the visiting team's dressing room, and from there on, proceedings moved on quickly. Under the urging of the coaches, the players hastily finished changing into their training gear before heading to the pitch to go through a pre-match warm-up.

Minutes later, after concluding the warm-up, they returned to the dressing room and donned their match gear. Then, after listening to Coach Allegri's pre-match address, the players who had made the starting eleven exited the dressing room with all the haste they could muster before heading back to the pitch to commence their Serie A battle against Cagliari Calcio.

Naturally, Zachary, the young playmaker serving punishment for his late-coming behavior that morning, headed to the bench instead of joining the rest of the first-string players on the playing field. Surprisingly, his absence from the starting eleven caused only a few intuitive Juventus supporters to raise their eyebrows. As for the other supporters, they probably assumed that Coach Allegri had just rested the young playmaker, especially since Juventus was playing against a much weaker Cagliari Calcio side. So, they didn't react abnormally to his absence from the starting line-up.

Proceedings moved forward, and the teams went through the pre-match routines, including the customary handshake and captain's coin toss. Then, when all the clock hands in Sardinia pointed to the seven o'clock mark, the referee's whistle sounded, and the long-awaited match commenced with Cagliari Calcio's kick-off.

Cagliari Calcio was a team placed third last on the Serie A table. They had only accomplished a measly result of two wins, six draws, and seven losses out of their opening fifteen Italian Serie A games.

Their chances of winning were so low that even the betting companies had given Juventus a paltry odd of 1.08 to win the game. And due to their greatly-lacking form and momentum, all the supporters watching the game thought that the flying Juventus squad would make quick work of the Cagliari side.

But as we all know, there is never a hundred percent certainty when predicting the result of football matches. At certain times, the lower-placed teams could also overpower the footballing giants with the

right game plan, attitude, match discipline, and some luck — and that was what happened during that evening's match between Cagliari Calcio and Juventus.

With the absence of Zachary from the squad, Juventus struggled to control the game in the early stages. The often-creative and solid midfielders like Andrea Pirlo and Arturo Vidal failed to control the game, especially after being constantly harassed by the hostile Cagliari supporters within the stands. And on several occasions of pure carelessness, they lost possession and allowed the ardent Cagliari players to launch terrifying counterattacks, which eventually caused nightmares for Juventus' defense.

In such a manner, the game proceeded forward, and the hardworking Cagliari players slowly gained the advantage. They built up momentum and confidence, and it wasn't long before they stunned the traveling Juventus supporters into silence with a successful counterattack.

They broke through Juventus' ranks and raced into the lead during the twelfth minute of gameplay, with Víctor Ibarbo, Cagliari's center forward, teeing up Andrea Cossu to drive past Gianluigi Buffon with a missile from outside the box. And with that, they were firmly in the driving seat and soon built up even more momentum.

Things could've gotten worse for the Old Lady if the highly-experienced Buffon had not been on hand to stop a 15th-minute point-blank header from Víctor Ibarbo, Cagliari's center forward. Fortunately, after that incident, the Juventus players seemed to have woken up and begun to exert pressure on the Cagliari goal.

The on-form Carlos Teves and Fernando Llorente, Juventus' two strikers, soon became the main threats as they linked up with crosses from the wings to try their luck on goal. They even came close to scoring during the 34th and 39th minutes, respectively, only to be denied by stunning saves by Alessio Cragno, the Cagliari keeper.

Proceedings moved forward, and the second half soon arrived, with fans and commentators alike thinking that the Juventus players would shift into high gear to look for an equalizing goal. But the Cagliari players, who'd started the first half well, once again proved why they were a tricky side to play against, especially at their home ground.

During the 49th minute, they won a corner kick after executing yet another startling counter against Juventus. Daniele Conti, Cagliari's captain, took the corner with perfect precision to link up with Víctor Ibarbo, who headed home to score Cagliari's 2nd goal for the evening.

The score was then 2:0 in favor of Cagliari, the home team, and Juventus were already staring down the barrel of their first defeat of the season. Be that as it may, they didn't give up and stepped up their game to launch more purposeful attacks against the opponents. But they still couldn't find the back of the net even a single time as the game approached the late stages.

Moreover, as the saying goes, misfortunes never come singly. When people watching the match were beginning to believe that things couldn't get any worse for Juventus, a reckless tackle from one of the opponents during the 56th minute took Andrea Pirlo, Juventus' deep-lying playmaker, out of the equation. As such, the Italian Maestro joined Claudio Marchisio and Patrice Evra on the list of injured players, thus leaving his teammates to pick up the pieces against the tenacious Cagliari side. For sure, it was one unexpected crisis after another.

Chapter 513 Zachary Vs. The Cagliari Fans I

Cagliari Calcio 2: Juventus FC 0

Coach Max Allegri was brimming with fury as he glanced at the score on the Stadio Sant'Elia's massive jumbotron. From his experience as a coach, he clearly understood that the fighting spirit of his players was at the bottom low for that game against Cagliari Calcio. As such, their pass completion rate was terrible, and they were lax and not hardworking enough while taking on the opponents. They were far from their best and had thus already conceded two goals against Cagliari.

"Boss!" Maurizio Trombetta, Juventus' assistant coach in charge of the first team, said. "The medics have already come to a conclusion. Andrea can't continue. His calf suffered the brunt of the tackle, and he can't finish the remaining minutes of the game."

"Shit!" Coach Allegri muttered under his breath. "This day is turning out to be our worst outing in this Serie A season."

"Yes, indeed," Coach Maurizio, his assistant, agreed. "So, what's your plan, boss? Should we bring on Zachary to strengthen our midfield? He's our best option at the moment."

"Zachary..." Coach Max Allegri mumbled, frowning slightly. Of course, he knew Zachary was the best option to help Juventus out of their predicament. But the challenge was that he was still on punishment after arriving late that morning. As such, the coach didn't want to give him leeway by introducing him early into the game.

As if reading his mind, Coach Maurizio sighed. "Boss! I know that the team should be strict with all players, especially with regard to disciplinary matters. But aside from that, we sometimes need flexibility while enforcing some punishments. Take Zachary's case, for example. It was his first time driving in Italy. So, he missed the road sign and incurred the ire of the traffic police, thus arriving late. So, boss! Considering his circumstances, shouldn't we give him some leeway? Moreover, we need him in this game. Shouldn't we stop being rigid and bring him on to help us stabilize the situation? Remember! We must do all our best not to lose this game."

On hearing his assistant's words, Coach Allegri narrowed his eyes. He turned his attention back to the pitch and noticed that the medics were about to finish the first aid on the injured Andrea Pirlo. As such, if he didn't bring on a substitute right away, his team would have to play the next few minutes with only ten men on the field. And just because of that numerical disadvantage, Juventus might concede another goal immediately after the restart.

"This is really a bad day..." Sighing with dejection, Coach Max Allegri finally made up his mind. He turned his attention back to his assistant and said, "Let's go with your suggestion. We'll immediately introduce Zachary in place of Andrea Pirlo. We'll also bring on Alvaro Morata for Fernando Llorente to further stabilize our situation and create more chances up front."

"That's a good plan, boss," Coach Maurizio Trombetta said, his eyes sparkling with expectation. "Both Zachary and Morata have been warming up on the sidelines. I'll tell them to get ready and step onto the pitch immediately."

"Good," Coach Allegri said, nodding. "Let them hurry. We don't want to restart the game with only ten men."

"Okay."

Zachary, who happened to be warming up on the sidelines, sighed with relief after learning that he would be entering the pitch. He hurriedly returned to the bench and changed into his match gear before stepping toward Maurizio Trombetta to receive his match instructions.

"Zachary!" The assistant coach said, patting his shoulder. "We don't have much time. So, I'll have to be brief. You'll be substituting Andrea Pirlo in our midfield. Just play as a classical central midfielder and control the play in and around the center of the pitch. That's all we need from you to take back the initiative against the opponents. Any questions?"

"None, coach," Zachary responded. "I know what I have to do."

"Good!" Coach Trombetta smiled. "Don't forget what we discussed yesterday. Forget the fans during the game and focus only on your football. Okay?"

"I understand, coach," Zachary replied, his voice brimming with confidence. His yearning for some football action had soared high into the night skies of Sardinia, especially after spending a considerable fraction of the match on the bench. His conviction was beyond normal levels, and he was ready to do his best to help his team turn the game around. As for the Cagliari fans, rumored to have racist tendencies, they could go to hell. He would use his skills to silence them, and everything would be uncomplicated from there on.

FWEEEEEEE

The referee's whistle sounded a few seconds later, and the fourth official put up his board to signal the substitutions. Zachary immediately ran onto the pitch in place of the injured Andrea Pirlo, while Alvaro Morata, the Spanish striker, replaced Fernando Llorente. They quickly took up their positions, and the referee blew the whistle to restart the match with a Juventus free kick.

Since the free-kick position was close to the center circle and far away from Cagliari's goal, the Juventus players decided to take it short. Arturo Vidal, Juventus' defensive midfielder, flicked the ball toward the right wing — to find Stephan Lichtsteiner, and with that, the game was again underway.

Stephan Lichtsteiner, Juventus' attacking wing-back, was as swift as ever on the flanks. He fed the ball past Danilo Avelar, Cagliari's left midfielder, before initiating a mad dash toward the other side of the pitch. Then, when the angle opened up, he chipped the ball into the middle to find Zachary, who had just run into an unmarked pocket of space on the border of the final third.

Zachary relied on his perfect control to connect with the pass from Stephan Lichtsteiner. But no sooner had he made the second touch than the boos and jeers around the Stadio Sant'Elia hit a crescendo. The Cagliari staunch fans behind their goal immediately started hauling insults at him while others vocalized maddening monkey chants, hoping to throw him off his game.

"What the hell..." Zachary was surprised by the behavior of the fans as he prodded the ball forward. It was as if the entire stadium was against him, as the Cagliari supporters went all out to boo him and disrupt his concentration. And it was at that moment that he realized that it wasn't good to take the warnings of the coaches lightly.

"I just need to keep my calm and ignore them..." Zachary thought to himself as he continued moving the ball forward, hoping to initiate an attack against Cagliari. However, one of his touches on the ball was a bit too heavy, and he gifted the opponents a chance to regain possession through Daniele Conti, a Cagliari midfielder.

Daniele Conti, also the Cagliari captain, was on point when Zachary blundered. He executed a ruthless sliding tackle and booted the ball away from Zachary's feet to find Antonio Balzano, Cagliari's right midfielder.

And with that, Cagliari was again on the counter for the umpteenth time that evening while Zachary was yet to understand how he'd lost the ball. A few seconds had already passed since he committed the error, but he was still standing in the same spot as a statue, seemingly unaware that he'd just gifted the opponents another goal-scoring chance.

"Ripiegare e difendere. Ripiegare e difendere..."

The yells of Coach Allegri jolted Zachary out of his trance, and he whirled around just in time to see Antonio Balzano, the Cagliari midfielder, racing towards Juventus' half at breakneck speed. He could see that it was another dire situation for Juventus, as most of his teammates had been in Cagliari's half when he lost the ball.

"Fortunately, there's still time..."

Such a thought flashed through Zachary's mind, and he took off, chasing after the Cagliari man with the ball. His long strides ate up yards of space in seconds, and he cut through the middle of the pitch like a bullet out of a muzzle. He pursued to defend since he was hell-bent on rectifying his blunder by stopping the counter and winning the ball back for Juventus.

Fortunately for Zachary, Antonio Balzano slowed down after running into a blockade by Giorgio Chiellini right after racing past the center line. The Cagliari man tried to go wide instead of cutting inside with the ball, thus allowing Zachary to catch up from behind. And that simple error was what put an end to Cagliari's counter.

Zachary was not the least bit careless when he caught up to Antonio Balzano. He bided his time well and pressured the Cagliari midfielder with his presence.

He forced Antonio Balzano to make a series of errors, and when the time was ripe, he slid forth without hesitation. He booted the ball toward Giorgio Chiellini and thus stopped Cagliari's counterattack before it could do any damage against Juventus.

"BOOOO..."

Deafening boos and jeers immediately erupted from the stands as Zachary picked himself from the ground after executing the tackle. He could even hear monkey chants mixed in with the sounds as the Cagliari supporters tried to rattle him and throw him off his rhythm.

But unluckily for them, Zachary had already entered the zone after making that tackle to win back the ball. He was in a high state of focus, and the chants from the stands seemed like background noise without any influence on his mental state.

"Chiellini!" He yelled towards the center back. "Pass the ball to me."

On hearing the shout, Chiellini, who was about to pass the ball back to the keeper, immediately halted his actions. He glanced at Zachary with a trace of surprise in his eyes and then kicked the ball to him.

"Excellent..."

Zachary thought to himself as he brought the ball under control. He was already in the zone — and as such, his heightened spatial awareness allowed him to have a perfect view of the entire field.

Chapter 514 Zachary Vs. The Cagliari Fans II

Zachary's mind was calm like still water as he quickly moved the ball forward. As he jogged, his S-graded spatial awareness worked like the best of charms, and his eyes took in everything, major and minor, around the pitch.

Carlos Tevez had initiated a spirited run toward Cagliari's box through the right flank while Alvaro Morata was bolting through the middle of the pitch. As for Roberto Pereyra, Juventus' other midfielder — he had just raced into an unmarked pocket of space close to the center circle and was eagerly motioning for Zachary to pass the ball to him.

But what surprised Zachary was that he noticed that the three Cagliari midfielders were all out of position. For instance, Daniele Conti, Cagliari's captain, had floated off to the right flank to keep an eye on Stephan Lichtsteiner, Juventus' highly agile attacking wing-back, while Albin Ekdal, Cagliari's other defensive midfielder, was keeping track of Arturo Vidal towards the left flank. As for Andrea Cossu, Cagliari's last central midfielder, he was quickly closing down Zachary, hoping to pressure him to release the ball.

The three Cagliari midfielders were obviously trying their best to execute a man-to-man marking tactic to keep Juventus at bay. But after being drawn out of their respective positions by the highly technical Old Lady players, they had left the middle spaces unchecked, thus leaving a very clear and unmarked highway, from Zachary's position, through the middle and all the way to Cagliari's backline.

And by making such an amateur mistake during the execution of their tactics, the Cagliari men were surely begging for a beating. And if Zachary could get past Andrea Cossu, the only Cagliari midfielder, who was quickly closing down on his position, he might be able to make something out of nothing by going at it alone.

"Fortune favors the bold..."

Such a thought flashed through Zachary's mindscape, and at that crucial moment, with barely 30 minutes remaining to the 90-minute mark, he made a bold decision. He ignored the calls of all his teammates and took off towards the other side of the pitch like a flying arrow just let loose by a mighty archer.

A second or so later, he came across the first obstacle in the form of Andrea Cossu, the Cagliari midfielder. And it was at that moment that the boos and monkey chants in the stadium hit another new high as he prepared to take on the Cagliari man.

While trying his best to maintain a steady mind, Zachary slowed down to draw in the opponent. Then, just as Andrea Cossu was a meter away, Zachary stepped over the ball once with his left leg while letting his body follow through with the step-over.

Consequently, Zachary's tall frame leaned toward the left, giving the impression that he was just about to bolt past Andrea Cossu from that direction. However, as the opponent took the bait and tilted toward the same side, hoping to make a block, Zachary abruptly altered his center of gravity and collected the ball with his right foot.

His heart racing like a predator on the hunt, he abruptly shifted his frame towards the right by relying on his incredible agility and body control. He then prodded the ball forward and zoomed past Andrea Cossu while readjusting his posture to regain his sprinting form. Then, a second later, his legs pumped like the pistons of a race car, and he dashed through the space neglected by the Cagliari midfielders. He was on a mission to quickly help his team turn the tides and score a goal before it was too late.

"BOOOO...."

"BOOO..."

As Zachary sprinted forth, loud boos, maddening screams, and irritating monkey chants reverberated, like an antistrophe, instituting a wild typhoon of jeers in Cagliari's home stadium. Those noises shook the entire place and eventually resounded in Zachary's ears. And even while in the zone, those deliberate racial insults jolted his mood and threatened to affect his momentum as he raced forward with the ball.

But fortunately, he'd already prepared himself when he decided to run with the ball. So, he didn't try to suppress his emotions but allowed himself to feel the rage from all the booing and jeering. And like a wild horse on a rampage, he let the anguish boil within him before it manifested into a wild frenzy, propelling him forward.

"Whoosh!"

Fueled by his anguish, he continued cutting through the pitch like an incarnation of the Flash and soon started bearing down on Cagliari's box. His momentum was unstoppable, and he magically and repeatedly raced past opponent after opponent before eventually making it to the space before Cagliari's 18-yard box. Then, just before the Cagliari's center backs could close him down, he surveyed the situation ahead of him with a single glance and decided to go for the spectacular.

"BAM..."

The next moment, the sound of his boot connecting with the ball was audible in his ears as he smashed the ball from twenty yards away. His shooting skills and sharpness came into play, and he unleashed a hell of a missile toward the top right corner of the goal.

"Please, go in..."

Zachary clenched his fists as he sent the ball flying. His intent was to score a spectacular goal and silence all the fans jeering at him. He was also hoping to score quickly — and, in so doing, give Juventus a chance to come back into the game within the final minutes of gameplay.

However, the next instant, Zachary felt his mood sink deep into the abyss of desperation, feeling like the world was working against him. He couldn't contain his frustration as he noticed that Alessio Cragno, the Cagliari keeper, had grazed the ball with his fingertips after making a spectacular dive. As such, the shot-stopper had barely managed to send it off its trajectory, thus sending it out of play for a corner kick. The man had once again saved Cagliari from conceding a goal during the 62nd minute.

"F*ck..."

Zachary couldn't help but mumble a couple of expletives as he watched the ball bouncing out of play. He'd placed the shot immaculately but still failed to score due to the alertness of the keeper. As a result, his mental state and confidence took another blow, and he could only place his hands at the back of his head with regret.

"Zachary! BOOO..."

"Zachary! Screech! Screech..."

Right then, before Zachary could calm himself down, the Cagliari fans in the stands behind the goal initiated another wave of verbal attacks on Zachary. They hurled out insults, vocalized monkey chants, and even pointed middle fingers at him. They were obviously going all out to affect his state of mind, hoping to make him even less of a threat to their team. Their shamelessness knew no bounds, and they were slowly but steadily wearing away Zachary's self-control.

"Zachary! You need to remain calm..." A gentle pat on Zachary's shoulder helped him calm down as he was about to explode with fury. Turning around, he came face to face with Kwadwo Asamoah, Juventus' left attacking wing back, who happened to be watching him with concern.

"Don't be angry at them," Kwadwo Asamoah continued without allowing Zachary a chance to speak. "You can think of them as a bunch of ignorant fools or barking dogs, and you shouldn't lower yourself to their level. Okay?"

"Okay," Zachary responded, taking a deep breath. "I'm calm enough."

Kwadwo Asamoah smiled and said, "Then, I'm glad. Just remember that if you could help us defeat Cagliari in such an atmosphere, that would be the perfect response to their insults. If we can score many goals against them and thrash them so hard that the entire stadium falls silent... Or if we can stifle their shouts by dominating them on the pitch such that they are even ashamed to call themselves Cagliari supporters... How good can that be? For me, that is the perfect revenge against them. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I do," Zachary replied with a simple nod. He felt incredibly pumped and psyched after listening to his teammate's words. As such, he yearned to do even more to help his team overpower Cagliari.

"Thanks." He said to Kwadwo Asamoah after a moment.

"Don't sweat it. Teammates are there to help each other out." The Ghanaian replied with a smile. Then, smiling slightly, he continued, "The clock is ticking. So, let's quickly prepare for the corner. And remember that the whole team is always with you."

"Okay..."

Zachary exchanged a few more words with a few other teammates, including Giorgio Chiellini, Juventus' assistant captain, before taking a position right outside the box to attack the corner. At that moment, he was at the peak of his concentration as he had already pushed the boos from the crowd to the back of his mind. He was waiting and biding his time, ready to take any chance that came his way and, in so doing, get some sweet revenge on the Cagliari fans.

FWEEEEEEEE

After organizing the players within the box, the referee blew the whistle and motioned for Juventus to take the corner kick. Immediately after, Stephan Lichtsteiner, Juventus' wing-back, quickly took the corner and sent a curling ball toward Cagliari's box.

It was a chance for Juventus to test Cagliari's keeper. As such, most of Juventus' players, including Giorgio Chiellini, Carlos Tevez, and Arturo Vidal, leaped up to meet the corner ball. They all battled the Cagliari players for aerial superiority, hoping to meet the corner ball and score an opening goal for Juventus.

However, once again, luck was not on Juventus' side. The Cagliari keeper leaped high and made another timely intervention by punching the ball away from the area and toward the middle. And in so doing, he managed to save Cagliari from conceding a goal during the 64th minute.

"There's still a chance..."

Zachary, who happened to have not made a run into the box, sensed an opportunity as he noticed that the keeper had not punched the ball far enough. He immediately judged that the ball would land only about a dozen yards from the box before springing into action.

He chased after the ball like a whirlwind and got to it before any of the opponents could close him down. He controlled it immaculately before quickly whirling around and looping it over a fast-approaching opponent.

However, that was not the end of his magic. Keeping the ball close to his feet, he bounded forward and dashed past another opponent with a simple shift of pace.

His angled run took him toward the left side of the box and further away from the mouth of the goal. Fortunately, he also drew away the Cagliari defenders from their positions as they chased after him, hoping to close down his shooting angle towards the near post. Additionally, he also tricked the Cagliari keeper into shifting toward the near post with his sprint, thus leaving the rest of the goal undefended.

"Chance..."

The gears in Zachary's mind shifted and fell into place, and within anything but an instant, he judged that there was a gap in Cagliari's defense. He acted immediately, relaxed his spine, and dug his boot under the ball. And with the most delicate of touches, he lifted the ball and looped it over all the defenders in the box, hoping to find the top right corner of the far post.

"Silence!"

All the rowdy Cagliari fans behind the posts turned silent as the ball drew a parabola from the left side of the box toward the undefended part of the goal. Most probably, they were praying and hoping for the ball to hit the post and bounce out of play. But alas, they were out of luck at that moment, and Zachary's well-placed effort continued moving forward before grazing off the post and eventually homing into the back of the net.

Chapter 515 Zachary Vs. The Cagliari Fans III

Cagliari Calcio 2: Juventus FC 1

After a few seconds of silence, Zachary's spectacular goal gave way to thunderous cheers intermixed with annoying boos, monkey chants, and vuvuzelas. As the volume of the sounds increased, they blended together into a single booming wave that exploded forth and shook every soul within the Stadio Sant'Elia.

But all the noise had nothing to do with Zachary, especially since his entire focus was only on the game. He sprinted forward and picked the ball from the back of the net before running all the way back to the middle and placing it on the center spot.

His hurried actions expressed his intent clearly. He yearned to restart the game quickly after scoring the goal so as to keep his team's momentum going. He desired to increase his team's chances of scoring a goal or two within the next few minutes. And that way, he wouldn't have to face the embarrassment of suffering a defeat against a much weaker Cagliari side and its annoying supporters.

"Ragazzi!" Zachary used his little knowledge of the Italian language to call out to his teammates, who were taking up positions on the pitch as they readied themselves for the restart of the game. "We're just a goal down. We only need to score one more and tie the game. Let's do this. Let's show Cagliari that we are Juventus." He ended his little speech by clapping his hands for emphasis.

On hearing Zachary's loud shout, most of the Juventus players on the pitch were surprised. They did not respond to his little motivational speech but turned to glance at him with weird looks.

Their expressions betrayed their inner thoughts, and they seemed amused by the sudden change in the on-pitch behavior of their often-quiet but highly skilled teammate. Most times, he wouldn't say a word during a match. But right then, he had just yelled at them using a tone of voice more intimidating than the one often used by 'an angry' Coach Max Allegri. Zachary's change was sure surprising for them.

On noticing their slow reactions to his yell, Zachary was a bit annoyed. Narrowing his eyes slightly, he shouted, "Why do you all have blank looks on your faces? Aren't you aware that we must win this game? We must score as soon as possible. We can't lose to a weak team like Cagliari. We're Juventus, for God's sake."

At that moment, right after hearing his provocation, his teammates seemed to regain their wits. It was unknown who yelled first. But all the Juventus on-field players soon joined in to shout, "we're Juventus," repeatedly, as they waited for the Cagliari players to take their positions on the other side of the pitch. Their team spirit was overflowing and pouring out of their bodies like a torrent as they waited for the referee to blow the whistle and signal the restart of the game.

FWEEEEEEE

The referee finally blew the whistle after a few more seconds. Right then, VÃ-ctor Ibarbo, Cagliari's center-forward, restarted the game with a back pass toward his midfield. He kicked the ball from the center spot, hoping to find Daniele Conti, Cagliari's captain, positioned close to the border of Cagliari's defensive third.

"High pressing! Let's close them down right away..."

Zachary yelled at the top of his voice when he saw the Cagliari man about to control the ball. His blood boiled with an indomitable fighting spirit, and he led the charge toward the other half, intending to deny the Cagliari players any time to settle down. He was like an incarnation of Usain Bolt on the pitch, and in only a few seconds, he was within meters of Daniele Conti, who happened to have taken a few extra unnecessary touches on the ball.

"What the hell is this guy doing? Why is he slow? Is he inviting me to take the ball from him?"

Lightning-fast thoughts flashed through Zachary's mind as he raced forward. But those musings didn't slow his actions, and he continued closing down the Cagliari captain. Like a mighty lion pouncing on helpless prey, he accelerated and ran at Daniele Conti like mad.

"Man on! Man on..."

The yells of the Cagliari players seemed to jolt Daniele Conti from his trance. Raising his head slightly, he noticed that an opponent, who happened to be Zachary, was already bearing down on him. He panicked and hastily whirled around before raising his leg with the intent to kick the ball to Albin Ekdal, his counterpart in Cagliari's midfield.

"Chance..."

Zachary thought to himself as he read the Cagliari midfielder's intentions like an open book. He didn't rush to make a sliding tackle as he had previously intended but instead kept bearing down on the opponent while waiting for an opportunity.

Then, when Daniele Conti swung his leg to kick the ball, Zachary acted with all the haste he could muster. Like a martial artist, he whipped out his leg while being carried by his forward momentum to initiate a sliding tackle. He timed his move to perfection and thus utilized an outstretched boot to block the ball.

"It actually worked..."

Zachary couldn't contain his happiness after robbing Daniele Conti of possession and sending the ball only a few meters away. But all the joy he was feeling still didn't slow down his actions. Instead, the overwhelming delight became fuel for his fighting spirit, and he picked himself from the ground with the urgency of a cat that had just caught the scent of some catnip.

Adrenaline pumped through his system, and he accelerated and pounced on the loose ball like mad. He got to it before any of the Cagliari players could react, and what followed was obvious.

The Cagliari players were slow to react as they had not expected their always-reliable captain to lose the ball in a dangerous area immediately after the restart. So, Zachary took advantage of their sluggishness and cut through them like a knife through butter. He rushed through the middle, skipping past opponent after opponent, as he took a mazy route towards Cagliari's goal at breakneck speed.

Of course, a few Cagliari players reacted better than their teammates while trying to stop him. For instance, Simone Benedetti and Luca Rossettini, the two Cagliari center-backs, tried to block Zachary by relying on their incredible physiques to bar his way.

But who was Zachary? He was a man who was almost unstoppable after gaining momentum, and as such, they couldn't stop his run. With just a few side steps and a simple body feint, Zachary sent the two men packing and was soon one-on-one with the keeper who had come out to meet him.

All that mattered at that moment was remaining composed, and Zachary being Zachary, of course, couldn't fail at such a simple task. He slowed down slightly to draw in the keeper. Then, when the keeper took the bait and rushed forward, Zachary darted past him toward the right before hammering the ball into the back of the net to score Juventus' second goal during the 67th minute.

Cagliari Calcio 2: Juventus FC 2

The score on the mega jumbotron changed to confirm Juventus' second goal as the home fans grew totally silent for the first time that evening. They stopped their booing for a few seconds, and at that moment, Zachary again experienced true bliss, taking joy in the fact that he was the very person that had silenced them.

However, even while feeling joyful, Zachary didn't celebrate as usual. Instead, he stood right before Cagliari's goal and faced Cagliari's staunch supporters behind the goal before putting a finger to his lips. His message to them was clear: "Please, will you shut up!"

"BOOO..."

"Screech! Screech..."

Zachary appeared to have poked a hornet's nest with his taunting celebration. The fans seemed totally incensed, and they immediately renewed their booing and jeering with an ever-growing momentum. Mixed in with their shouts were even insults targeted at Zachary's ancestors, family members, etcetera. The Cagliari fans had obviously gone mad with rage after their team conceded an equalizing goal against Juventus. Naturally, emotions of anguish, disappointment, and dissatisfaction were quickly brewing in their ranks.

Having just scored a goal, Zachary grew more spirited as he sensed their rage. He didn't know why, but at that juncture, he felt that the anguish of the Cagliari supporters was comparable to the cheers of the Juventus supporters back in Turin. He was experiencing true happiness as he watched the fans who had taunted him the whole evening go mad with rage. As such, the corners of his lips slowly curled upwards as a soft smile outlined his often-intense facial features.

On the sidelines, Maurizio Trombetta, the assistant coach in charge of the first team, sighed and shook his head after noticing Zachary's actions. He turned towards Coach Allegri and said, "We informed this boy not to agitate the fans. But he went against our advice and taunted the fans after scoring. His future while facing off against Cagliari will be filled with hardships."

"Who cares about the future?" Coach Allegri answered off-handedly. "I would do the same if I were in his shoes. What matters now is that he has scored two goals and tied the score within seven minutes after stepping onto the pitch. As a result, we still have more than twenty minutes to bag another goal and win the game. We should be able to go home with another three points today."

"Indeed..." Maurizio Trombetta hummed an agreement. With his experience as a coach, he could tell that the momentum was with Juventus. Thus, if nothing unexpected happened, Juventus would score another goal or two and eventually win the game.

The predictions of the coaches were spot on. After the game restarted, the Juventus players utilized high-pressing tactics to win the ball back as soon as possible. Then, from there on, they started launching waves and waves of attacks until they created an opportunity for Alvaro Morata, who scored Juventus' 3rd goal during the 82nd minute.

However, that wasn't the end of the drama on the pitch. The game proceeded forward, and during the 87th minute, Juventus won a free-kick right outside the box. And, of course, Zachary being Zachary converted the free kick successfully to score Juventus' 4th goal and his third for the evening. He had bagged another hat trick in a Serie A game and thus couldn't contain his happiness as he picked up the match ball and headed towards the press area for the post-match interview.

Chapter 516 Post-Match Interview

Within the press area of the Stadio Sant'Elia, Beatrice Paretti, a Sky Italia sports journalist, scrunched her eyebrows after she received instructions from her immediate supervisor. Frowning slightly, she inquired for clarity: "Boss!" She spoke slowly but in a steady voice while holding her phone against her ear. "Did you just ask me not to interview Zachary about how he felt about the racist behavior of the Cagliari fans? Racism is a talking point that can garner the attention of the masses. It can also improve our viewership. So, as reporters, why should we ignore this topic no matter how sensitive it is?"

Mario Romano, one of the top dogs managing Sky Italia Turin, sighed from the other end of the line. "Beatrice! Let me ask you this. Over the years, Italian football has been dragged through the mud because of claims of racist behavior against foreign footballers. As a result, our public image outside

Italy is so poor that foreigners think that a black or Asian player will surely face racial insults as long as he appears in Italy. Do you know why?"

"Isn't that simply because some fans, for instance, those of Cagliari, are prone to racist behavior?" She voiced her doubts.

"Yes, there's that," Mario replied with another sigh. "Some of the fans around Italy are really racist while supporting their respective team. That's a fact. But that does not mean we have the football league with the most racist incidents in Europe. For instance, if you were to investigate meticulously, you would realize that Spain and France, which happen to be some of the most preferred destinations for every professional footballer worldwide, also experience racist incidents during professional matches almost every other year. But do you know why Spain and France still have a good reputation even after experiencing all those incidents?"

Beatrice didn't respond but quietly waited for her boss to continue.

Taking the cue, Mario said from the other end of the line, "All those leagues have managed to maintain their perfect reputations because the media of their respective countries cooperates with them. Of course, if a racist incident happened during a match, the Spanish or French media would cooperate with the football governing body to issue a statement against the incident. But they will not make it the center of the news by using statements such as 'racism - the cancer affecting Italian football' like we usually do. Instead, they'll play it down by using words like some bad seeds among the fans destroyed the harmonious football atmosphere during the match between teams A and B by insulting players so and so. In that way, they are still fighting against racism, but in such a clever way that they don't affect the reputation of their respective leagues."

"So, do you mean that we should follow their example and downplay the issue of the Cagliari fans racially abusing Zachary?" Beatrice Paretti hurriedly interjected before her boss could continue. She was getting impatient, especially since she knew Zachary would arrive for the post-match interview soon.

"Yes, that should be our intent," Mario Romano said. "If Zachary doesn't mention the issue himself, let's leave out the ugly stuff from the interview. Let's leave it for our publicity guys to find a way to handle the incident. As for you, focus on only the football and Zachary's performance during the interview. Okay?"

"Okay, got it. I will do as instructed." Beatrice said and ended the call. She couldn't help but sigh as she shoved her phone back into her pocket.

She knew that if all institutions at all levels worked hand in hand to fight racism in football, they would attain much better results. But alas, there were always obstructions in the battle against this cancer. For instance, some owners of the major broadcasting corporations and a few presidents of the football governing bodies in Italy were always reluctant to come out and condemn racist behavior during matches -- the excuse always being: they didn't want to hurt the reputation of Italian football. How could they use such a lame excuse that couldn't fool a three-year-old?

Deep within her heart, Beatrice knew those politicians and businessmen were not giving their all in the battle against racism. But there wasn't much she could do to change the tide, as she was just a small-time reporter trying to make ends meet. She would obviously not go against the instructions of her bosses and risk her career for a fight that didn't really concern her well-being.

The second Zachary stepped into the press area, a beautiful and formally-dressed journalist with a label of Sky Italia on the breast pocket welcomed him enthusiastically. Her assistants quickly shoved microphones in his face while her camera crew worked fast to focus their lenses on him.

"Nice to meet you, Zachary Bemba," she said with a practiced smile. "I'm Beatrice Paretti, a sports journalist from Sky Italia. Thank you for staying back for this interview. It shouldn't be an easy feat after an intense match like you just played."

Zachary nodded and motioned for the reporter to go on with the interview. He was impatient to finish the annoying but compulsory task of talking to the reporters so he could return to the dressing room to shower and celebrate with his teammates. He also needed to eat something as he had expended plenty of energy during the match.

As if noticing his impatience, the beautiful reporter smiled and went straight to the point. "Zachary!" She said. "Let me start by congratulating you upon scoring a hat trick and helping Juventus win yet another Serie A game. But can I ask why you started from the bench today when you are clearly fit and on top of your game?"

Zachary smiled and replied, "The answer to that question is a team secret. So, I can't answer it. Sorry."

The corners of the journalist's lips twitched slightly after hearing Zachary's response. But she still maintained her professional smile and went on with the interview. "Your hat trick today has taken your tally this season to seventeen Serie A goals in 16 matches and 26 in all competitions. Your goal-scoring form is impressive. It seems you have adapted well to live at Juventus over the past few months."

"Yeah," Zachary responded. "My teammates have helped me adapt well within the team. My chemistry with most other players has improved, allowing me to perform better during games. As I'm sure that my teammates always have my back, it's easy to let go of most worries and focus on creating goal-scoring chances for my team."

"Talking about Juventus," the reporter commented, "your whole team is in great form. You have won all your matches this season and amassed 48 points. Since you are yet to lose a game, are you gunning for an unbeaten run this season?"

"As players, we only live in the present," Zachary said. "We always take things as they are and only aim to win every game that comes our way. As such, we'll always do our best on the pitch to overpower our opponents. As for lofty goals, like accomplishing the unbeaten run, we don't have to think about such stuff as that will make us lose focus of the present."

"Let's talk about today's game against Cagliari," the reporter said with a smile. "You were so intense after stepping onto the pitch against Cagliari. I saw you chasing loose balls, tackling, and running at opponents like your life was at stake. You even yelled at your teammates several times, which is an obvious contrast to how you've always acted in previous matches."

"Yeah, I did all that cause this game was important to me," Zachary replied. "Firstly, I hate losing, and as a Juventus player, I had to do my all to help my team win the game, including taking on tasks like motivating my teammates with a few words at certain times. Secondly, I was working hard to suppress the insults and jeers the Cagliari supporters were hurling at me. It's good that luck was on my side, and I scored a hat trick against Cagliari. Otherwise, I would have had to go back to Turin depressed after enduring the insults of all those supporters."

"I'm happy for you," Beatrice said before abruptly changing the topic. "Zachary! The Golden Boy award ceremony is tomorrow night, and you are one of the favorites tipped to win the accolade. Are you excited?"

"Yes, I'm," Zachary said, smiling. "As a football player, winning awards is the best testament to my career progress. So, I'll be looking forward to the award ceremony. I really hope to emerge as the best young player for 2014."

"I think you'll win," Beatrice said.

"That, I can't be sure before the results are out." Zachary countered. "The voting process is complex. I don't know if the majority representatives will vote for me."

Beatrice chuckled. "Let's end the interview here. Thanks again for staying back to answer our questions. I wish you all the luck during the award ceremony tomorrow. May you emerge as the overall winner."

"Thanks," Zachary replied before stepping away from the cameras. He was still feeling the bliss of helping his team achieve a comeback against Cagliari. So, he walked with a swagger before quickly arriving at the visitor's dressing room.

"Zachary!" Maurizio Trombetta, the assistant coach, was the first to welcome him. "Nice game. You were truly impressive today."

"Thanks," Zachary replied, feeling contented. He then exchanged a few pleasantries with the other coaches and teammates before celebrating with them in the tight space of the dressing room. Then later, Zachary washed up and ate some snacks before joining his teammates on a team bus to the airport. He was looking forward to returning to Turin and following the Golden Boy award ceremony scheduled for the following evening.

Chapter 517 Preparing For His First Award Ceremony Ever

The morning sunlight streamed golden through the window in a well-mannered announcement of the already-risen sun. Groaning slightly, Zachary woke up with a start and glanced at the clock on the opposite wall.

"It's already ten," he mumbled, coming to a realization that he'd already slept for close to eight hours. Without any dilly-dallying, he jumped out of bed, washed his face, and changed into his exercising gear.

Then, after stretching slightly, he started his morning yoga practice, hoping to quicken his post-match recovery.

As he went from pose to pose, memories from last night's game manifested within his mind. He smiled as he recalled how he'd gone all out to perform incredibly well and score yet another hat trick. As a result, he'd taken his Serie A goal tally to sixteen, thus surpassing the 13 goals of Luca Toni (from Hellas Verona) and the 14 goals of Mauro Icardi (from Inter) to become the top goal scorer of the season so far.

"Coming to Italy was sure a good decision," Zachary mumbled as he thought about what he'd already achieved within a few months after joining Juventus.

Aside from solidifying his position on Juventus' starting line-up, he had also become the top scorer for two competitions, including the Champions League and the Serie A, right before the half-season mark. His performances for Juventus were ever spectacular, and he was already among the favorites to win the golden boots and take home the MVP awards for the two competitions.

Zachary was, of course, not so arrogant to assume that he would have easily achieved such outstanding feats in other teams or leagues except Juventus and the Italian League. For instance, had he chosen to go to the Premier League and join Tottenham, he might still be struggling to reach the five-goal mark even halfway through the season. That was because he would have lacked the necessary conditions to succeed at such a club and league.

First and foremost, there was the lack of world-class players like Andrea Pirlo to support him at Tottenham. That being the case, he would lack the competitive pressure to help develop his skills at the club level while also losing the option of gaining highly-skilled teammates to support his goal-scoring form and help him win league games. What would have followed would have been him losing his football instincts and slowly regressing to a mediocre player, even with the system as support. That was how bad one wrong move could be to a professional football player.

Secondly, there was an aspect of the English game being highly competitive and physical. Zachary felt he was not ready yet to take on such a challenge.

He figured that he wouldn't have been able to maintain his incredible performances and consistency in the English premiership. As such, he had readily agreed to join Juventus, hoping to refine his skills in the Italian League before considering the notion of joining an English side.

"Phew"

Letting out a breath, Zachary continued going through his yoga practice. He trained for the next twenty minutes while gradually increasing the difficulty of the poses until he felt all his stiff muscles relaxing. He then performed a few simple stretches to further loosen his muscles before heading to the bathroom for a shower.

Ten minutes later, he stepped out of the bathroom feeling refreshed. He quickly donned a brand-new tracksuit and stepped into his trendy sneakers while looking forward to the day that had just commenced.

Coach Allegri had given the entire team a day off after Juventus' win against Cagliari the previous night. That meant that all the other Juventus players would be spending time at their homes to relax and recover from post-match fatigue. They wouldn't have any responsibilities to take up their time until the afternoon of the following day when Juventus' team training would recommence.

However, for Zachary, it was a different story. He had to attend the Golden Boy award ceremony later that evening. As such, he couldn't relax until he worked on his hair and finished purchasing a presentable suit for the ceremony.

For any other person, buying fashionable clothes wouldn't have been a daunting task. But for Zachary, it was the opposite. Firstly, he was used to donning free tracksuits from Nike for seven days straight and had zero experience purchasing a suit in Turin. Secondly, he couldn't go window shopping from street to street looking for what he needed as he feared the passionate football fans who would readily swarm him for autographs if they ever caught a whiff of him.

"I better call Kristin to help me out," Zachary thought and immediately picked up his phone. Settling down on his bed, he dialed her number and waited patiently for the call to connect.

"Hello, Zachary. It's a wonderful surprise to receive your call today morning." Kristin's voice sounded from the other side of the line within seconds. She was as bubbly as ever.

"Hello, Kristin," Zachary replied and then exchanged small talk with her for the next minute. Then, when he judged that the timing was right, he switched gears and went straight to the point.

"Kristin," he said abruptly. "Do you have some free time today?"

There were a few seconds of silence at the other end of the line before Kristin's voice sounded again. "I have a class from 11:00 AM to 1:00 PM. But I will be free in the afternoon. Do you need me for anything?"

"Yeah," Zachary said. "As you know, I'm one of this year's Golden Boy award nominees. The ceremony is today, and I need your help buying a suit. You don't have to do much but guide me to shops where I can get one."

"Oh," Kristin said, sounding a bit surprised. "That's easy. I know several shops in Turin that sell good suits. Let's meet at 2:00 PM, and I'll take you to one."

"Great," Zachary said. "Where should we meet?"

"Let's meet at the Vinovo," she replied. "I'll be at the gates by two in the afternoon."

"Perfect. Thanks for your help."

"You're welcome," she said. "See you at two."

"Okay, see you then," Zachary replied before ending the call.

As scheduled, Zachary met up with Kristin at the gates of the Vinovo at 2:00 PM. She was as beautiful and shapely as ever, even in her winter get-up that covered most of her frame. She smiled naturally, exposing her perfect teeth, as she sat beside Zachary in the back seat of Angelo's Citroen.

After greeting Zachary, she turned towards Angelo, Zachary's driver sitting behind the steering wheel. "Hello, Mr. Angelo," she greeted. "How's your afternoon?"

"My afternoon is fine," Angelo replied before asking, "Zachary tells me that you'll be helping him buy a suit. Which one is our first stop?"

Kristin thought before saying, "Let's head to the Armani store at Centro Commerciale Lagrange first. We should be able to get what we need there."

"Okay," Angelo agreed. "Let's go."

And with that said, Angelo started up the engine, and they set off toward the Armani store at Centro Commerciale Lagrange. They arrived roughly thirty minutes later, and Zachary instructed Angelo to park the car nearby. As for him, he put on his large hat and shades to conceal his identity before alighting from the vehicle and entering the store with Kristin.

After entering the store, Zachary removed his shades, allowing the customers and shop attendants to recognize him. Their eyes lit up, and they couldn't help but steal a couple more glances at him.

Fortunately for Zachary, people in the shop maintained their distance and didn't approach him for autographs. His tense mood relaxed as it seemed he wouldn't have to worry about football fans swarming him while enjoying his shopping.

"This is the benefit of shopping here," Kristin whispered in Norwegian from beside him. "Customers and attendants are already used to seeing celebrities like football stars, professional athletes, and musicians who usually shop here. Additionally, there are rules prohibiting the harassment of celebrity customers while in the shop. As such, no one will bug you for autographs while in the shop."

"That's great," Zachary said, glancing around the shop. His eyes took in all the trendy suits and other pieces of fancy wear around the store. They were all carefully and meticulously organized around the place to arouse the desires of the customers entering the shop.

"Hello, esteemed customers," a shop attendant approached them as they were still taking in the sights. She was a beautiful girl in a black formal lady's suit with a round face adorned by a pair of slim spectacles. "Welcome to Armani! It's our honor to host you today. How may I be of service to you today?"

Kristin smiled at the girl and responded, "We need a good suit for him." She pointed at Zachary. "We need it ASAP. He has to put it on for a ceremony today evening."

"Oh!" The girl said, giving Zachary's tall frame a once over. "Roughly 6'4 to 6'5 feet and a toned physique. We may have some fine pieces that may suit your taste. Do you wish to see them?"

"Of course," both Zachary and Kristin replied in unison.

"Excellent! Follow me." The girl said with a smile before whirling around to lead the way.

Zachary and Kristin followed her, and after a few minutes, they arrived at the far end of the shop. There they saw many suits in different styles and colors under her guidance.

Zachary tried them on one by one before selecting a Soho Line single-breasted tuxedo priced at 4,000 Euros as his preferred attire for the award ceremony in the evening. But he didn't stop at that. He also selected four other suits as emergency wear for future dinner parties before paying for them and exiting the shop with Kristin.

After buying the suit, the next item on his agenda was to have his hair worked on. He didn't wish to look like a thug with a scruffy hairstyle while attending the Golden Boy award ceremony in the evening. So, he once again turned to Kristin for advice.

Kristin was like an encyclopedia for fashion stores around Turin. On hearing Zachary's plight, she quickly directed Angelo to drive him to a high-profile saloon located somewhere on the outskirts of Turin.

On reaching there, the hairstylists worked quickly, and in just two hours, Zachary emerged from the saloon, sporting a cool braided and tapered Nipsey-4 hairstyle. His beard and sideburns were also neatly trimmed to highlight his prominent cheekbones and sharp look. He was so suave as he walked out of the saloon.

Smiling slightly, he relaxed as he finally finished preparing for his first award ceremony in his professional football career. He was only remaining with the task of donning his new Armani suit before heading to the Golden Boy award ceremony venue.

Chapter 518 The Golden Boy Award

At 7:00 PM that evening, Zachary arrived at Torino Incontra, the Golden Boy award ceremony venue. He was dressed to kill in his new tuxedo that matched well with his polished black Aubercy Diamond-Studded Shoes. His new hairstyle gave him a rogue feel, and a Patek Philippe moonphase silver watch adorning his wrist highlighted his elegance.

Smiling slightly, he marched forward and stepped on the red carpet leading to the venue. He walked confidently as the cameras flashed to capture his majestic visage.

"Zachary! An autograph..."

"Zachary! We love you. You will win for sure..."

"Zachary..."

The fans lining along the sides of the entrance went wild with frenzy and started yelling out his name. Zachary was surprised as he hadn't foreseen such a scenario where the Juventus fans would flood the venue to support him before his first award ceremony. However, as he had already been long used to the ever-present attention from the fans, he didn't lose himself. He waved to them before continuing his short march on the red carpet.

Heart beating wildly with excitement, Zachary finally entered the ceremony venue after a short while. He swept his gaze around the place and noticed that many guests, including retired footballers and journalists alike, had already taken their seats. Most were in the middle of hushed conversations while occasionally glancing ahead to catch the performances on the main stage.

As he continued looking around, Zachary also saw many cameras and their respective crews around the venue. They were probably put in place by famous Italian Television stations, like Sky Italia, Juventus TV, and Sportitalia, to capture live moments of the occasion. By the look of things, the stage had been set, and the award ceremony was about to commence.

"Zachary!" A middle-aged man with an usher's badge on his breast pocket called out while approaching from the side. "It's an honor to have you here. Welcome!" He spoke perfect English tainted by a little bit of an exotic accent, typical to Italians.

"Thank you," Zachary replied, nodding to the man.

The man smiled and said, "I go by the name - Mario Alberto. I'm one of the ushers for the ceremony. Let me guide you to your seat."

"Thanks," Zachary replied. "Please lead the way."

After hearing that, the man's smile brightened, and he eagerly turned around to lead the way. Zachary followed after him and passed by row after row of guests until he made it all the way to the front seats in the venue. And there, he finally saw the other top nominees for that year's Golden Boy award.

Raheem Sterling, the English player with the second highest probability of winning the award, was at the end of the row, enjoying the performances on the stage.

Then, Zachary also saw the other nominees in the same front row. They included Kurt Zouma, Divock Origi, Luke Shaw, Mateo Kovacic, and a few more faces Zachary couldn't recognize. They had all donned stylish suits, probably thinking that they had a chance to win the award. And maybe since they were proud footballers topping their generation, they didn't bother to initiate a conversation with Zachary when he arrived. They only nodded at him in greeting and returned their focus to the stage.

Zachary, on his part, smiled at those who nodded at him and then settled down on a seat assigned to him by the usher. On the surface, he seemed composed without any change of expression. However, on the inside, his feelings were a tad bit complicated.

During his previous life, he could only get glimpses of the faces of all the young football stars seated beside him only on the TV screen. In that lifetime, he could only admire them from afar without daring to dream about ever competing with them. How could he when he was even failing to make it in the low-tiered Congolese League back then?

But in Zachary's new life, everything changed for the better. He had obtained the GOAT system, and with its support coupled with his hard work, he quickly rose to prominence on the international football stage. He was only a few days past his 20th birthday, but he was already playing for Juventus, one of the mightiest football clubs in the world. But that was not all. He was also a distinguished player in the club, able to score goals, match in, match out, and as a result, he had been nominated for the Golden Boy

award. It was a fact that he was flying, and he'd already achieved much more than he could have ever dreamt about during his previous life.

Thinking about all his achievements so far, Zachary felt satisfied, happy, and overwhelmed at the same time. Fame, money, and trophies — he already had it all at a young age, and nothing was stopping him from soaring even higher into the skies.

With all those feelings flooding his mind, he warned himself against growing complacent and losing it all. He didn't wish to have any regrets at the end of his career, so he pledged to work even harder and compete for more accolades. Achieving greatness was the basis of his conviction, and he would do his utmost to grow as a footballer and compete with the best in the world. He would either be successful or die trying.

Proceedings moved forward quickly, and soon enough, an electrifying opera performance ignited the atmosphere and set the stage for what was to come. Most of the lights dimmed, leaving a single one focusing on the master of ceremonies taking the stage. He smiled as he greeted the audience before introducing the background of the Golden Boy award.

The MC's speech was pretty brief. But he still managed to describe how the Golden Boy was an award given by sports journalists to the young male footballer playing in Europe, who was perceived to have been the most impressive during a calendar year. The MC also mentioned that the accolade was established by the Italian sports newspaper - Tuttosport in 2003 before going—on to introduce the representatives from the other top newspapers around Europe involved in the selection of the Golden Boy.

Among the dozen or so names mentioned were top media houses like De Telegraaf from the Netherlands, Mundo Deportivo from Spain, A Bola from Portugal, Bild from Germany, and The Times from the United Kingdom. They could all cast a single vote to select the most impressive young player of the year to win the Golden Boy award.

The MC went through everything pretty quickly. Eventually, he concluded his address with catchy words to excite the audience before inviting Pavel Nedvěd, a former Juventus player and legend, to present that year's Golden Boy award.

Pavel Nedvěd, on his part, was as swift as any professional footballer could be while walking onto the stage. He stepped before the podium with a smile and adjusted the microphone to match his height.

Then, after greeting the audience and saying a few more perfunctory words in Italian, he finally got to the moment that mattered most.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "This year's Golden Boy award goes to one of the most promising players the world has ever seen. In just one year after stepping onto the professional football stage, he has been the best player in almost every competition he participated in. Ladies and gentlemen, please put your hands together for Zachary Bemba, this year's Golden Boy award winner."

"Clap, clap, clap..."

The applause from the audience was like thunder as Zachary stood up and walked to the stage. He moved gracefully, taking advantage of his long strides to reach the podium quickly.

Finally, the long-awaited moment arrived when Zachary received the glittering Golden Ball from Pavel Nedvěd. His smile brightened as he thought about all the sweat and torment he had endured over the past three years while pushing forward to evolve as a footballer.

The countless hours and days he spent in the gym or on the turfs training all came back to him, flooding his mind and making his feelings a mess. He took a deep breath and thanked the audience and organizers in as few words as possible before expressing his gratitude to those who had expended great efforts to support him. Among those were his late grandma, his coaches, and his teammates. He spoke confidently in English, and in just a minute, he ended his speech and walked down the stage with his Golden Boy award in his hand.

It was also at that moment the applause from the audience resounded again to commemorate his winning the first award of his budding football career. He felt good as he took in the acknowledgment of those in the hall, but at the same time, he couldn't help but think about his late grandma once again.

"How good would it be if she was here to share all this with me?" He mused, sighing to himself. Then, taking a deep breath to calm himself, he settled back in his seat to wait for the award ceremony to end.

Later that night, after taking interviews from various journalists and after answering countless congratulatory calls from acquaintances and teammates alike, Zachary finally settled on his bed, feeling worn out to his very core.

He thought of calling Camilla to share his success with her. But after contemplating for a moment, he pushed the idea out of his mind. Camilla had been out of reach for the past two months. She would hardly ever receive or respond to his calls or messages, so he figured he was better off waiting for her to reach out.

Sighing to clear away the gloom of his failing relationship, he rolled into bed, hoping to sleep early, as he had to attend team training the following afternoon. But right then, before he could even enter in-between the sheets, a system notification reverberated in his mind.

"DING"

"Congratulations to the user for winning the first major award of his career and completing a hidden system mission," the system AI's apathetic voice sounded immediately after. "The user can check the mission completion details and rewards associated with the mission completion on the system interface."

Zachary's fatigue was immediately swept away, and his heartbeat quickened with excitement. A soft smile outlined his facial features, and he commanded the system to display the just-completed mission details.

Chapter 519 Surprising Rewards From The System

Zachary blinked reflexively to adjust to the brightness of the translucent crystal-like display that had just manifested in front of his eyes. Then, without further ado, he started perusing through the details of the just-completed mission.

4 New Messages

CONGRATULATIONS

->You have won the first major award of your career and thus completed a Hidden System Mission.

->You've taken your first step toward gaining the recognition of the international football community as one of the most exceptional players of countless generations.

->Mission Rewards

1) A total of 100,000 Juju points

2) An S-grade mental conditioning elixir

-> Congratulations to the user once again. Continue working hard and try to win more internationally recognized accolades, including the Ballon d'Or, as soon as possible.

Zachary couldn't contain his surprise after reading the mission completion message. The mission was much more rewarding than expected, and he'd obtained quite plentiful benefits. Among those was an S-grade mental conditioning elixir, one of the system's most potent elixirs that could further fortify his mental capacities. He couldn't contain his happiness as he perused the contents displayed on the crystal-like system interface again.

"Based on the system's rewards," he mused, "it seems that individual accomplishments are much more rewarding than those involving team efforts."

Zachary had already noticed the pattern in the system's reward policy. For instance, if he became an MVP or top scorer in a tournament, the system would award him more than if he helped his team win a domestic league. So, following that reasoning, the GOAT system was clearly pushing him to improve his

abilities while also encouraging him to win more individual accolades. Maybe, that was the fastest way to achieve GOAT status. He was now even more sure of the conjecture after seeing the reward for winning the Golden Boy award.

"Let's just take one step at a time," Zachary mused before returning his focus to the rewards for the hidden mission completion. His glance fell on the 100,000 Juju point reward, but after a moment of contemplation, he chose to store the amount for future use.

He had, of course, not forgotten that he would need 1,000,000 points for the next system upgrade. So, he had long started taking every chance available to stock up on Juju points.

"Phew..."

Taking a deep breath, Zachary finally focused on the best reward for the night. It was the S-grade mental conditioning elixir, which happened to be one of the most potent system elixirs that he could consume and not experience side effects. By ingesting the tonic, he would strengthen his mental abilities, such as spatial awareness, tactical knowledge, risk assessment, and mental strength, and thus push his game intelligence to a higher level in a short while.

But that was not all there was to the elixir's benefits. Zachary also understood that by improving his mental capabilities, he would gain better body control and thus see a spike in some of his overall ball skills.

For instance, with a sharper mind, he would assess risks and make decisions within moments during critical moments of the gameplay. He would also rely on his enhanced intelligence to execute skills much more quickly and fluidly, thus becoming more clinical on the pitch. And as a finishing touch, his passing skills would also benefit from the mental fortification afforded by the elixir.

As Zachary was well aware that the S-grade mental conditioning elixir was the most suitable system tonic to improve his overall abilities quickly during the middle of the season, he acted immediately. Without even the slightest hesitation, he made up his mind to consume it right then, even before going to bed.

"System," he called out telepathically while glancing at the interface. "I would like to consume the S-graded mental-conditioning elixir now."

"Command received," the system AI replied. "Confirming... A single dose of the S-graded mental-conditioning elixir is ready for the user's use in the system inventory. The user can select the respective card in the inventory to summon the elixir. As a reminder, the user must consume the elixir within five seconds after its removal from the system inventory or risk its effects disappearing."

"I understand," Zachary replied. He quickly went through the already-familiar process of summoning the elixir from the system inventory before tapping on an image of a small apple with the words "S-grade mental-conditioning elixir" inscribed below it.

The card soon exploded into glittering particles, and a tiny apple, roughly the size of a small lollipop, materialized from the system's crystal-like display. Zachary didn't waste time admiring its lustrous glow but instead wolfed it down as quickly as possible. Then, he adjusted to a comfortable position within his bed and covered himself while bracing himself for the elixir's effects to kick in.

Everything that followed was all too familiar to Zachary since it was his second time consuming an S-graded mental conditioning elixir. His head started spinning, and an explosion went off in his mind, causing his thoughts to turn into a jumbled mess. He felt himself losing his senses, and after a few seconds, all went dark. The pain and disorientation caused by the S-grade mental-conditioning elixir had once again caused him to black out.

**** *

In the meantime, Kristin was still awake, tending to her duties as Zachary's publicity secretary. She worked quickly to post the best pictures of Zachary posing with the Golden Boy award and added captions such as "The beginning of greatness," "The rise of one of the best of a generation," and so on and so forth. She successfully posted them on all of Zachary's accounts, including Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. And with that done, Kristin finally relaxed, washed up, and went to bed, feeling fulfilled. However, she could not imagine the commotion that her posts had caused on the net.

A few minutes after Kristin posted the pictures, Zachary's followers started sharing the posts on their respective pages. A reposting craze followed, and those few images were reposted probably millions of times until the words "Zachary" and "Golden Boy award" became trending topics on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook.

In fact, those keywords turned so popular within hours and thus emerged on the list of top google searches in Europe, Africa, and South America. And with that, even the often-neglected and previously forgotten Golden Boy award became a household term for most football lovers worldwide. Indeed, a great person could make everything he was associated with more famous and prestigious, even on an international stage.

But that was not all there was to the craze. Some netizens, including football critics, journalists, and fanatics, soon started a debate about whether Zachary had the potential to win the Ballon d'Or that season. And that was another fuse that caused another explosion of discussions on the internet, causing even presenters of famous sports shows worldwide to join in on the conversation.

"So, guys!" Emilia Vasquez, one of ESPN's famous sports presenters in Europe, said on her show the following morning. "There's a massive debate on the internet that has taken me by surprise. Many notable football critics around Europe and the rest of the world are beginning to believe that Zachary has a chance to compete for the Ballon d'Or award this season. What do you guys think?" She turned to the two pundits present in the studio.

Joshua Morales, the pundit closest to her, smiled at the cameras and said, "I think Zachary has a fair chance of competing for the award. First and foremost, his team, Juventus, is already flying and on course to win the Italian Serie A. Their form is so out of this world — to the point that they haven't lost or drawn a single time this season. Be it the Champions League or their domestic competitions — they still hold a hundred percent winning record. The crucial point is that Zachary has been at the center of it all, putting up spectacular performances and scoring incredible goals to help Juventus continue winning. He has already proven his amazing abilities as an exceptional player, and I think he has a fair chance to compete for the Ballon d'Or."

Shaka Hislop, the other pundit in the studio, laughed and supplemented with an analysis of his own. "Let's also not forget that as we speak now, he's the top scorer of both the Italian Serie A and the Champions League. In my honest opinion, I don't think he will stop scoring goals as long as he remains fit. Now, imagine Juventus winning both the Serie A and the Champions League. How would the situation unfold? Wouldn't Zachary be the favorite to win the Ballon d'Or under such circumstances?"

"Those are sound conjectures, fellas," Emilia Vasquez said with a smile. "But the crucial question is: Can Juventus win those two competitions?"

"Now, that'll be difficult for Juventus," Shaka Hislop answered. "Don't get me wrong. I obviously don't doubt Juventus' ability to win the Serie A and maybe another domestic Italian competition like the Coppa Italia. They are by far the strongest team with the mightiest squad in Italy. That's why they have

achieved a hundred percent record and amassed all the 48 points they could possibly get from their sixteen Serie A matches so far."

"But if we move to the Champions League, I don't think they will have it easy," Shaka Hislop continued. "Juventus will have to beat the world's greatest teams, like Real Madrid, Barcelona, and Bayern Munich, in order to achieve continental glory. Can Zachary up his game and perform beyond expectations against such teams? Can he continue putting up spectacular performances to help his team overpower all those giants? Can he continue scoring in the Champions League and outshine other outstanding players like Messi, Cristiano Ronaldo, Neymar, Robert Lewandowski, and Luis Suárez? All those are questions to consider as we assess Zachary's chances of winning the Ballon d'Or this season."

Chapter 520 An Increase in Stats

Zachary woke up feeling refreshed. After glancing at the clock and noticing that its hand had already passed the eight o'clock mark, he immediately jumped out of bed.

"The effects of the S-grade mental conditioning elixir are truly wondrous," Zachary mumbled as he walked to the bathroom to wash his face. His memory received a significant boost after he consumed the elixir. Without even focusing, he could recall many Italian sentences that previously seemed like alien text. He felt like, if he tried hard, he might even be able to master Italian within less than six months. But that was not all.

Zachary also noticed that his spatial awareness had risen to another level. With just a glance, he could commit all the details around him to mind. Be it their size, the position, and the color of all objects around him — Zachary could remember all those elements even without trying that hard to observe. Moreover, everything seems to have increased to a higher definition, allowing him to perceive more particulars he had previously ignored.

"System," Zachary called out as he stepped out of the bathroom. He dried his face with a towel before commanding, "Bring out my current attributes."

"Command received," the AI intoned. "User's attribute data coming up on the interface immediately."

Zachary smiled. He settled on his bed and started perusing the information that had just appeared on the translucent crystal-like display before him.

*USER STATS

->Physical Fitness: S+

->Soccer Technique: S+

->Game Intelligence: SS

->Mental Ability and Mindset: S+

->X-Factors: S+

->GOAT Skills: 10

"Oh!" Zachary exclaimed. "My game intelligence attribute jumped over the S+ grade and improved straight to the SS grade. Wonderful!"

Zachary was giddy with excitement. His game intelligence had been at the S- grade for a few months. But after consuming an S-grade mental conditioning elixir, he improved straight to the SS grade. His game intelligence was finally catching up with that of experienced world-class players like Andrea Pirlo.

A few weeks ago, Zachary had given in to temptation and scanned Andrea Pirlo with the system's snooping tool. He finally learned that exceptional players like Andrea Pirlo didn't possess abnormally-high physical fitness stats. In fact, Pirlo's physical fitness attributes, including agility, strength, and stamina, were just at the inferior S- grade average. They were a level lower than Zachary's S+ fitness stats.

But what was impressive about Andrea Pirlo was his game intelligence and passing skills. His passing skills, spatial awareness, risk assessment, and mental strength were at the SSS grade, while his tactical knowledge was at the SS grade. Those few attributes overcompensated for his weaker physique, allowing him to gain the ability to play like a maestro on the field of play. He didn't need to take on players by dribbling and tackling. Instead, he only needed to find spaces and use his insanely high game intelligence and passing skills during crucial moments. Then, he would be able to influence the game and win matches for his team without overexerting himself.

Zachary understood the charm of game intelligence after scanning Andrea Pirlo. That was why he was over the moon after leveling his intelligence attributes to the SS grading.

"System," he called out telepathically. "I would like to see the breakdown of my game intelligence and soccer technique stats."

"Command received," replied the system AI. "Stats breakdown for game intelligence and soccer technique will be coming up on the interface shortly."

With that said, the crystal-like display shimmered slightly before bringing up new information on the screen. Zachary reflexively blinked his eyes and began to read through the contents.

->Soccer Technique: (Av. Rating: S+)

Ball Control: S+

Dribbling Skills: S-

Passing Accuracy: S+

Body Control: S-

->Game Intelligence: (Av. Rating: SS)

Spatial Awareness: SS

Tactical Knowledge: S+

Risk Assessment: SS

Zachary observed that his spatial awareness and risk assessment were the individual stats that gained the most significant boost. As for tactical awareness, it was still lagging behind at the S+ grading. Perhaps, he needed to play more games and gain more experience before improving the stat.

Then, there were his soccer technique stats. Surprisingly, they hadn't received any boost after he consumed the S-grade mental conditioning elixir. Maybe, he needed to go through targeted training and get used to his high game intelligence before those technique attributes would level up. That was his gut feeling.

"Bzzt Bzzzt! Bzzt Bzzzt!"

Suddenly, Zachary's phone vibrated from the nearby table as he finished reviewing his stats. He quickly dismissed the system interface with a mental command before picking up the phone and glancing at the screen.

The call was from an unknown number. It began with a country code of 225, meaning it was from a foreign country.

"Could this be from the Ivorian officials? Could they have finished preparing my citizenship papers?"

The gears in Zachary's mind turned and fell into place quickly. He accepted the call and placed the phone against his ear.

"Bonjour, Zachary," the person on the other side of the line greeted in French. "I'm Omar Sangare, an Ivorian official helping with your citizenship papers. We previously talked on the phone."

"Oh, Sangare!" Zachary exclaimed. "I remember you. Are my citizenship papers ready? Can I play in the African Cup of Nations next month?" He went straight to the point.

"The papers are almost ready," the official replied. "As for playing in the AFCON, that will not be possible in your case. We have no problem with you joining us. However, CAF's bureaucracy has hindered us from registering you for the competition. Their procedures to approve a change of citizenship for any player can take roughly six months. Our hands are tied."

"Oh, I understand," Zachary said, feeling both disappointed and relieved. Joining the African Cup of Nations would increase his chances of winning his first international trophy with Ivory Coast. He knew that for a fact, as the Ivorians had won the 2015 AFCON during his previous life.

However, partaking in the African tournament would also force him to forego his club duties during January. And since he was a key player on the team, his absence might affect Juventus' performance, and his team could drop out of the Champions League, causing him to lose out on attaining European glory. Obviously, he would have had to make a choice if the Ivorians had called him for the tournament. But now, he just needed to go with the flow and concentrate on his club duties. It was a relief.

"Mr. Sangare!" Zachary said after a moment. "When will my papers be ready? And when can we announce to the public that I'll be playing for Ivory Coast?"

"Well..." Mr. Sangare said. "We could make the announcement in a few days when the papers are ready. But again, we don't want to distract your future teammates and their coaches, who are busy preparing for the African Nations Cup of Nations. So, I suggest that we make the official announcement in late March. That will be after the AFCON and just before the friendlies. It's a perfect time, in my opinion."

"Okay, then," Zachary agreed. "We will go with your plan. Please try to complete all the necessary procedures before March. I would wish to start playing international games as soon as possible."

"Sure," Mr. Sangare said with a chuckle. "We also want you to play our international matches soon. So, we'll obviously work fast to finish all the procedures concerning your citizenship."

"Excellent," Zachary said. "I have to say goodbye now and commence my morning practice. Thanks for the update."

"You're welcome. I will keep you updated concerning your whole citizenship change. Otherwise, I wish you luck in your upcoming games."

"Thanks, and goodbye," Zachary replied.

"Goodbye," Mr. Sangare said and hung up the phone.

Zachary stood in one place for a moment as he organized his thoughts. The main reason why he chose to join Ivory Coast was to compete in the 2018 World Cup. So, Zachary wasn't overly depressed after failing to join their AFCON squad. He instead felt relaxed as he had no diversions to distract him from his club duties.

But again, not joining the AFCON didn't mean that his schedule had opened up. He was still as busy as a worker bee, as he had to play in the Italian Serie A, the Coppa Italia, the Supercoppa Italiana, and the Champions League. All those were top tournaments featuring world-class clubs and talents. Zachary understood that he needed to do his all to remain focused if he desired to perform beyond expectations and help his club win most of the competitions. There was no way around it.

The enhancement of his game intelligence had come at the right time. His football brain had experienced a significant boost in its abilities, and as a plus, it could potentially push his ball skills to a

higher level if he went through targeted training. Thus, Zachary planned to work hard through the two-week Christmas break. He would go all out to push his body control or dribbling skills to the SS grade. Then, if all went well, he would shine on the football pitch come January.

"Let's start with the morning training for today."

Zachary psyched himself up. Without further ado, he started going through his morning yoga routine, hoping to warm up his body for the more intensive team training later that day.
