

Greatest 521

Chapter 521 Preparing for the Supercoppa Italiana

Zachary spent the morning hours going through his physical fitness routines. Under the guidance of Coach Bjørn Peters, his fitness trainer, he first went through a gym workout to hone his endurance, strength, and body control. Then, when the clock hand pointed to the eleven o'clock mark, he rested for two hours before enjoying a sumptuous lunch prepared by Inger, his chef.

After lunch, he didn't continue lounging around in his mansion. Instead, he got into his new Audi RS 7 and headed to the Vinovo for Juventus' afternoon training.

As usual, Zachary found dozens of fans and a few journalists waiting around the gates when he arrived at the training center. He rolled down his window and waved at them before continuing towards the parking lot.

He eased his car into one of the empty parking spots and alighted from the vehicle. He smiled as his eyes caught the visage of Coach Maurizio Trombetta, the assistant coach, who happened to have just arrived at the training center at the same time as him. The middle-aged coach was in full winter gear, with a thick jacket, a head sock, and gloves to keep the December chill away from his body. His eyes shone when he spotted Zachary.

"Zachary!" The assistant coach exclaimed. "Good afternoon!"

"Good afternoon to you too, coach," Zachary responded while picking up his gym bag from the back seat of his car. He then locked the doors before turning to the assistant coach again. "Coach! You seem to be in a good mood. Where's Christmas?"

"It's too soon to think about Christmas," Coach Trombetta replied with a chuckle. "Congratulations upon winning the Golden Boy award, by the way. Your form over the past year was incredible. You really deserved the honor."

"Thanks, coach," Zachary responded, grinning. He was in a good mood, especially after consuming an S-grade elixir and improving his game intelligence stats. He felt like everything around him was more vibrant than usual, and he couldn't stop himself from walking with a slight swagger as he headed toward the inside of the training center.

"Honestly," Coach Trombetta continued with his praise, "I'm really impressed with your capabilities on the team. Your goal-scoring form is excellent, and if you can continue maintaining your form, you might be able to make it into this year's Ballon d'Or shortlist."

Zachary chuckled. "The Ballon d'Or is still a bit far away from me. Setting it as my target would distract me from my current priorities. I only need to continue performing well, and if lady luck is on my side, I'll make the shortlist."

"That's a good mentality," Coach Trombetta said. "It's always good to focus on the present. The Supercoppa Italiana is only two days away. It's a chance for you to pick up your first silverware with Juventus. In this year's match-up, we'll face off against SSC Napoli in the Jassim bin Hamad Stadium in Doha, Qatar. Are you ready?"

"Yes, I am," Zachary replied, oozing confidence. Consuming the S-grade mental-conditioning elixir had allowed his stats to gain a timely boost right before the Supercoppa Italiana. He was in the best state he could ever be as a footballer. If all went as planned and nothing unexpected happened, he most important determiners of the result of the Supercoppa Italiana. You'll have to play intelligent 00:03

football and find a way to create as many chances as you can against Napoli. Additionally, you have would perform beyond all expectations in the Supercoppa Italiana final.

"I like your confidence," Coach Trombetta said as they continued further into the training center. "But please note that you must give it your all for the Supercoppa. We have to win. Evra, Marchisio, and Pirlo are missing due to the injuries they picked up during previous matches. You're the only remaining playmaker in the starting eleven. As such, your influence in the midfield will be one of the most important determiners of the result of the Supercoppa Italiana. You'll have to play intelligent football and find a way to create as many chances as you can against Napoli. Additionally, you have to be quick with your decision-making while on the ball — or else, the opponents will find a way to mark you and stop you from making your mark in the final."

"I understand, coach," Zachary said, feeling even more determined. "I'll do my best during the final. When are we setting off for Qatar?"

"Tomorrow," Coach Trombetta said. "We'll fly to Qatar in the morning. If everything goes as planned, we'll arrive in Doha by 6:00 PM and spend the night there. Then, on Monday morning, we'll go through a light training session to polish our tactics for the match before spending the rest of the day resting."

Finally, in the evening, we will head to the Jassim bin Hamad Stadium for the Supercoppa Italiana final against Napoli. That's the plan."

As the two conversed, they finally arrived before the dressing rooms. Coach Trombetta said a few more encouraging words to Zachary before heading off toward the coaching staff's dressing room. As for Zachary, he stepped towards the player's locker room while thinking about the Supercoppa Italiana final that was only two days away.

Inaugurated in 1988, the Supercoppa Italiana was an annual football match contested by the Serie A champions and the Coppa Italia winners from the season prior. However, if the same team had won both competitions for the previous football calendar year, the Supercoppa would instead be a match-up between the Serie A champions and the Coppa Italia runners-up.

During its first few years after its inauguration, the Supercoppa was often—scheduled in the summer as a super cup curtain-raiser to the new season played in the home stadium of the Serie A champion. However, in recent years, the Italian football league's governing body had started scheduling the match during the winter. Moreover, the match would often be hosted in stadiums outside of Italy, probably to attract more publicity for Italian football.

Previous Supercoppas were played in countries such as Italy, the United States, Libya, and China. As for that year, the match was to be held at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium, all the way in Qatar. So, for that matter, the Juventus squad needed to make the more than eight-hour-long flight to Doha to participate in that year's Supercoppa Italiana.

Zachary, on his part, was not against making the trip to Qatar. He had already spent roughly four months focusing only on football at Juventus. The daily training and packed match schedule had worn him out to a certain extent, and he figured that a change of scenery would be perfect for him. As such, Zachary was eager to travel to Doha and face off against Napoli there.

"Maybe, I can also spend a few more days on holiday there after the match," Zachary thought. "Doha should have many world-class sports facilities. Spending the Christmas break there won't affect my training plans. I only need to inform the coaches in advance."

Zachary finally arrived before the player's locker room after a few seconds. He pushed the door open and noticed that most of his teammates were already in the dressing room. Some had even already donned their training gear and were about to head out for the training.

"Ciao ragazzi! Come stai?"

Using his mastery of broken Italian, Zachary greeted them, one after the other, after stepping into the room. His teammates returned his greetings humorously and congratulated him upon winning the Golden Boy award. A few experienced players, like Gianluigi Buffon and Stephan Lichtsteiner, even encouraged him to keep working hard so he could compete for the Ballon d'Or. He could tell that they were truly happy for him for winning the Golden Ball award.

Thirty minutes later, at 2:15 PM, all the Juventus players had long assembled on the main training turf. The winter breeze sweeping across the ground assaulted them, causing them to tremble as their bodies fought against the cold environmental conditions. But they remained attentive as they listened to Coach Max Allegri's address.

"As you all know, the Supercoppa Italiana is only two days away," Coach Max Allegri said as he swept his gaze across his players. "But the time we have for training is even less than a single day, especially since we'll spend the entirety of tomorrow traveling. So, guys! We must utilize the limited time today to finalize all our preparations for the Supercoppa Italiana. We must refine our game plan for the match against Napoli or risk embarrassing ourselves on Monday evening. Are we together, guys?"

"Yes, coach!" The players replied more or less in unison.

Coach Allegri nodded and flipped his notebook open. "To save time, I'll first name the match squad for the game. That will allow all the players on the starting eleven to train in their individual roles today."

"Gianluigi Buffon will be in goal," Coach Max Allegri announced in a solemn voice. "In defense, we'll utilize three defenders. They are Giorgio Chiellini, Leonardo Bonucci, and Angelo Ogbonna. Moving on to the midfield: we'll employ Simone Padoin, Arturo Vidal, and Zachary Bemba as our three central midfielders. Simone Padoin and Arturo Vidal will be the holding midfielders, while Zachary will play as the attacking pivot. The three will also work together with Kwadwo Asamoah and Stephan Lichtsteiner to complete our midfield of five. Lastly, Fernando Llorente and Carlos Tévez will play as our forwards to complete our 3-5-2 formation. That's it for the starting eleven. Any questions?"

All the players remained silent and didn't respond.

"Now, to the substitutes," Coach Allegri said with a slight nod. "On the bench, we'll have Rubinho, Marco Storari, Martín Cáceres, Filippo Romagna, Federico Mattiello, Roberto Pereyra, Kingsley Coman, Simone Pepe, Sebastian Giovinco, and Álvaro Morata. That's it for the match squad. So, let's start our training for today."

With the coach's declaration, the training officially started.

The players began by going through a thirty-minute warm-up routine before moving on to the actual tactics session. And as planned, they focused on refining their tactics until all the players on the match squad had committed their roles for the game against Napoli to mind. Finally, in the evening, after working so hard for hours, the Juventus players said their goodbyes to their coaches and returned to their respective homes to rest for the night. They had done all they could to prepare for the match. All that remained was for them to travel to Doha and face off against Napoli in the much-anticipated Supercoppa Italiana final.

Chapter 522 The 2014 Supercoppa Italiana Challenge

"DING!"

A system notification sounded in Zachary's mind when he entered his bedroom later that night.

"The system has detected that the user is now an active member of Juventus' 2014 Supercoppa Italiana squad," the system AI's apathetic voice sounded in his mind immediately after. "Conditions for the 2014 Supercoppa Italiana challenge have been met, and the respective system mission initiated successfully."

"Does the user wish to view the mission details right away?"

"Of course," Zachary replied after switching on his bedroom light. He settled on his bed before continuing, "Please bring up the mission details."

"Command received," the AI's voice sounded in his mind again. "Mission details have been displayed on the interface."

The space before Zachary shimmered with bluish light, and a translucent crystal-like display manifested before him. Zachary took a deep breath and focused on the mission details that had appeared on the interface.

GOAT MISSIONS

#NEW MISSION: 2014 Supercoppa Italiana Challenge

->The system has detected that the user is part of Juventus' 2014 Supercoppa Italiana squad. The system has designed an associated mission for the tournament.

->The user needs to accept the mission first to stand a chance of winning rewards after completing the objectives below.

*Objective 1: Become the leading playmaker for the 2014 Supercoppa Italiana final by providing the most assists during the game.

*Objective 2: Help Juventus win the 2014 Supercoppa Italiana final by scoring at least one goal during the game. (To meet the objective, the user must meet two conditions. One, he has to score at least a single goal, and two, he has to ensure that Juventus wins the game)

*Objective 3: Become the Man of the Match for the 2014 Supercoppa Italiana final.

*Objective 4: Score a hat trick during the 2014 Supercoppa Italiana final.

*Rewards:

->Objective 1 completion reward: 5,000 Juju-points

->Objective 2 completion reward: 10,000 Juju-points

->Objective 3 completion reward: S-grade Agility Enhancement Elixir

->Objective 4 completion reward: The second of the twelve shards required to learn Ronaldinho's Step-Over and Feint Kingly Magic. (Note: This objective is also a partial fulfillment of the conditions to complete the Giant-Killer Hattrick Challenge)

->The user can choose not to accept the mission.

*Accept *Reject

*Punishment if the user doesn't realize at least one objective by the end of the game: Minus 50,000 Juju points.

*After accepting the mission, the user has to complete at least one milestone before the game ends to escape the penalty.

*Remarks: The only way to attain greatness is by never giving up while taking small but consistent steps forward.

Zachary's eyes lit up with excitement after reading the mission details. His hopes had already soared high as the system had again offered him a chance to win bountiful benefits if he performed well during the Supercoppa Italiana final. He thus readily accepted the mission.

Among the rewards was an S-graded agility-enhancement elixir which could potentially elevate his speed, body control, and dribbling skills to the next level. There was also a shard of Ronaldinho's Step-Over and Feint Kingly Magic, which would push him closer to obtaining one of the most effective dribbling styles in the world. Zachary felt even more motivated to try his best during the Supercoppa Italiana as he wanted to go home with all those rewards.

"Phew!"

Zachary took a deep breath and glanced at the clock on the opposite wall. On noticing that it was already 9:00 PM, he decided to prepare and go to bed as soon as possible. He wished to get ample rest that night before setting off with his teammates to Qatar the following morning.

After making the decision, Zachary proceeded with haste. He was soon in autopilot mode, washing up, brushing his teeth, and packing his luggage for the following day's trip. Zachary completed everything around 10:30 PM and then jumped in bed, hoping to descend into the land of dreams as soon as possible. But just as he was about to cover himself, his phone vibrated from a nearby table, causing him to furrow his brows. He wasn't expecting any call that late in the night.

"Who could it be?"

While suppressing his annoyance, Zachary scooped up the phone and noticed that the call was from yet another unknown number. The number began with +61, meaning that it was from overseas.

"Hello," Zachary said after pressing the accept button and holding the phone next to his ear. "Who's this?"

There were a few seconds of silence at the other end of the line before a familiar and feminine voice sounded in his ear. "Zachary! It's me. How are you doing?"

Zachary's mind short-circuited at that moment. "Camilla!" He called out. "Is that you?"

"Yes, it's me," she replied. Her voice was barely audible.

Zachary took a deep breath and asked, "Are you okay? I haven't been able to reach your phone for over two months. You also rarely reply to my WhatsApp messages!"

"Well..." she said. "I got an abrupt offer for a job in Australia some months back. It was a dream job for me. I acted quickly and moved there to begin work immediately. That's why I have been out of reach recently."

"Oh..." Zachary said, feeling a bit down. He decided not to ask obvious questions, like 'why didn't you call me before you moved' or 'why didn't you send me your new number when you arrived in Australia?' Deep within his heart, he knew the answer to all those questions.

"Zachary..." Camilla said after a few seconds. "Let me ask you something. Do you think we have been happy as a couple?"

Zachary's heart skipped a beat. He answered, "We had our good times together. We were happy before we got out of touch due to the distance."

Camilla sighed audibly from the other end of the line. "Zachary!" She said. "I have been doing some thinking over the previous few weeks. We should take some time apart to sort out our lives."

"Time apart..." Zachary's voice trailed off. He felt a bit empty on the inside.

"Spending time apart would be the best for both of us," Camilla continued. "Firstly, time apart will allow us to concentrate more on our individual careers. You will have more time to focus on your football, and I'll have more time for my new job. Secondly, time apart will allow us to sort out our feelings for each other. It's the best solution for our situation."

"Seems like you've got everything sorted out," Zachary said lightly.

"Zachary!" Camilla's voice rose up a notch. "This is also hard for me... I don't wish to do this, but we can't continue on like this..."

They continued talking for a few more minutes, and Zachary finally consented to Camilla's suggestion. Moreover, in essence, he had no other choice but to accept her terms. They both agreed to take an indeterminate period apart, with the excuse of needing more time to focus on their careers without distractions. They then ended the call on a seemingly positive note and wished each other blessed and good lives.

Zachary sighed again after placing his phone back on the table. He collapsed back into bed and stared at the ceiling for minutes. A fresh lump of emptiness grew within him, and he couldn't help but wonder when everything had started going wrong with Camilla.

Was it when he signed for Juventus and moved to Italy? Or was it before?

Zachary's mind turned and whirled as he thought of the days past when he was still a Rosenborg player. He had shared intimacy with Camilla, and they had seemed like the typical couple in love. Their lovemaking was always breathtaking, and there was mutual respect between them. Those were the good times.

But again, Zachary hadn't failed to notice that nothing else was holding together their relationship aside from their intimacy. They were the perfect couple when they made love, but aside from that, they didn't have many more things in common. They didn't even share many hobbies, beliefs, or cultural values, and their bond was not that firm.

Their fundamental worlds would not easily intersect since Zachary, himself, was a footballer determined to make it big, while Camilla was a corporate lady doing her all to rise up in the business world. Unless some sort of compromise was reached on both their parts, they would always be like two shining stars that only chanced upon each other and collided before following the natural laws and diverging to continue on along their innate trajectories. Their love was not just deep enough to survive the endless difficulties the world could inflict upon them.

"Life is not easy."

Sighing with dejection, Zachary switched off the light and entered between the sheets. He continued thinking about moments with Camilla until he dozed off and entered deep sleep around midnight.

The following morning, Zachary managed to wake up early, at around six. His previous night's conversation with Camilla was still so fresh in his mind, and his mood was low. But as a footballer yearning to achieve big things, he still forced himself to focus on his priorities. He couldn't allow himself to be bogged down by just one hardship in life.

He worked quickly with all the haste he could muster and finished all his preparations by seven in the morning. Then, after having breakfast, he entered his Audi RS 7 and drove to the Vinovo, Juventus' training center, where he linked up with his teammates. From there, their group boarded a team bus to the airport, thus beginning their long journey to Doha, Qatar, the venue for that year's Supercoppa Italiana final.

Chapter 523 A Perfect Defense-Splitting Pass

The Juventus squad arrived in Doha at around 5:30 PM. The sun had already set, and the bright artificial lights illuminated the hallways of Doha International Airport.

Zachary followed the rest of his teammates as they quickly went through the airport procedures and immigration checks. A dedicated team of helpers from the Qatar Football Association aided them, and they completed the entire process quickly. They then picked up their luggage and exited the airport.

During the winter months from October to March, the climate in Qatar was, at most times, just mild. From what Zachary had read before traveling, daily temperatures often ranged from 24°C to 35°C

during the day and 15°C to 22°C at night. The place was definitely a much warmer utopia when compared to Turin.

Equipped with all that knowledge, Zachary didn't even bother to put on a jacket. He had only donned a simple Juventus tracksuit, a head sock to keep his braided hair in place, and comfortable Nike sneakers for travel. He continued moving along with his teammates as they followed their guides to the arranged bus for the team.

"Juventus! Oye!"

"Zachary! Welcome..."

"Carlos Tevez..."

"Buffon... We love you..."

Suddenly, a cacophony of excited voices sounded while the players were on their way to the arranged bus. The noise immediately captured Zachary's attention, and he reflexively inclined his head to look.

A crowd of passionate supporters had gathered a few meters away, just beyond some parked taxis. Most of them were probably Italians who had traveled to support Juventus during the Supercoppa Italiana final, and they were being kept in order by airport security. Zachary also spotted a few men in long, white, and loose Arabic clothing among the crowd. They were most likely members of the Juventus fanbase in Qatar.

"I didn't expect that we had a lot of fans in Qatar," Kwadwo Asamoah commented from beside Zachary. He seemed excited. He waved back to the fans while pulling his suitcase towards the waiting bus.

"It's the Italian football publicity offices doing their work," Zachary said as he followed his teammates' example and waved to the fans. "The Italian football governing bodies must have put in quite the effort to market the Supercoppa in Qatar. We might get a full stadium during the game."

"I heard that the Jassim bin Hamad Stadium only has a capacity of 13,000 seats," Kwadwo Asamoah remarked. "The supporters attending the match will be much fewer than the numbers we usually attract back in Italy."

"Definitely," Zachary agreed. "But I still like the vibrant atmosphere and the good weather here. It's a good choice for the venue of the Supercoppa..."

After some minutes of exchanging small talk and waving to the fans, the Juventus players finally reached the organized team bus. Their guides helped them load their suitcases into the luggage compartment as they boarded the vehicle. Then, a few minutes later, when all the squad members had taken their seats, the bus started moving, and they set off for the luxurious The Ritz-Carlton, Doha hotel.

They arrived at the hotel roughly thirty minutes later and checked into their rooms. After settling down, they enjoyed a sumptuous dinner at the hotel's restaurant and then had a team meeting chaired by Coach Max Allegri afterward. Then, after about an hour of discussing team plans and strategies for the following day's game, they ended the meeting and returned to their rooms for the night.

The night and the following day's morning hours were all uneventful as all the Juventus players adhered to the team rules. All the players woke up early after enjoying a fulfilling night of rest at the luxurious The Ritz-Carlton, Doha hotel before eating breakfast and going through a light training routine later in the morning.

The rest of the day went as planned after the morning training. They had their lunch at midday and then attended arranged press conferences at around 1:00 PM before resting during the afternoon. Then, at five in the evening, after enjoying another light meal, they boarded their team bus and headed to the Jassim bin Hamad Stadium, ready to face off against Napoli in that year's Supercoppa Italiana final.

Monday, December 22, 2014.

Jassim bin Hamad Stadium, Doha, Qatar.

Time: 6:29 PM

The weather was just perfect, not so cold and not so hot. The stadium's floodlights had already been switched on, and they bathed the pitch in a luminous glow. Players of both Napoli and Juventus had already taken their positions, and they were only waiting for the referee to blow the whistle so they could commence the game.

A sudden silence descended upon the stadium as the fans stopped singing the chants for their respective teams. The supporters in the stands only waited quietly as the referee glanced about him and raised the whistle to his lips.

FWEEEEEEE

Paolo Valeri, the referee for the day, finally blew the whistle, and the stadium came alive once again. The supporters resumed singing as Gonzalo Higuaín, Napoli's center forward, kicked the ball back into his midfield to kickstart the game. At long last, the 2014 Supercoppa battle between Juventus and Napoli had commenced.

In the middle of the pitch, Marek Hamsik, Napoli's attacking midfielder, effortlessly controlled the ball from Gonzalo Higuaín. He turned and whirled before kicking the ball toward his left, hoping to find Jonathan de Guzmán, Napoli's left winger. The latter received it and tried to play a forward pass to Gonzalo Higuaín, the striker who was already strategically positioned in Juventus' half.

However, the ball from Jonathan de Guzmán was not accurate enough. It was easily intercepted by a highly agile Arturo Vidal, who slid in wholesale and poked it to Kwadwo Asamoah, Juventus' attacking wingback on the left.

"Ball!" Zachary shouted as Kwadwo Asamoah controlled the ball.

Kwadwo Asamoah didn't panic on hearing Zachary's shout. He effortlessly stepped forward to meet the ball before passing it to Zachary.

Zachary's ball control was as brilliant as ever. With light but quick movements, he connected with the pass from Kwadwo Asamoah as his eyes surveyed the situation all over the pitch. Just then, he realized that he could observe and scrutinize the movements of all his teammates much more clearly than

before. He naturally spotted Carlos Tevez, the striker who had long initiated a daring run toward the other side of the pitch.

The Argentine striker was already bolting past bodies and bodies of Napoli players while swerving left and right. His speed was impressive, and the striker would rush past Napoli's defensive line within the next five seconds.

The gears and wheels in Zachary's enhanced football brain whirled and turned before falling into place. In a split second, he realized he had to release the ball into the space behind Napoli's defense within less than four seconds or else risk Carlos Tevez running into an offside position and missing out on an opportunity.

The first second, Zachary shoved the ball forward with the tip of his boot to prepare for what was to come.

The next second, he stepped forward with momentum before drawing his leg all the way back like a taut bowstring. He also didn't forget to align his body at the perfect angle so as to make a flawless release. Everything was completed almost instantaneously.

Finally, the third second arrived as he swung his leg down and smashed the ball towards the other side of the field. He utilized the toe area of the inside of his boot to unleash a lofted ball toward the space behind Napoli's backline. Moreover, he had timed the pass faultlessly and only hit the ball during the second before Carlos Tevez could run into an offside position. In essence, he had sent forth the perfect defense-splitting pass to Carlos Tevez.

At the other end of the field, Carlos Tevez's eyes glinted with excitement as he noticed the ball flying toward him. He accelerated and raced past the two Napoli defenders trying to box him in before slowing down and chesting the descending ball forward.

The next second, the adrenaline pumping through his system pushed his speed to the max before the Napoli defenders could recover. He chased after the ball like mad and got to it in only a few seconds.

With the simplest of touches, he extended his boot and looped the ball over the approaching keeper. Then, he swerved right and circumvented the goalkeeper before collecting the ball again and hammering it into the back of the empty net. He had scored Juventus' first goal during the 1st minute of the Supercoppa Italiana.

"GOAAAAL...."

Carlos Tevez couldn't contain his excitement as the cheers around the stadium hit a thunderous crescendo. A bright smile outlined his often-intense features, and he ran all the way back to Zachary's position to give him a bear hug.

"Zachary!" He said with a chuckle. "That was the dream pass for any striker. You timed it so well. Thank you."

"There's no need for thanks. It's what I should do." Zachary's smile was brighter than usual as he hugged his teammate back.

The rest of the Juventus players soon joined the celebrations as the cheering from the stands continued resounding around the stadium. The players took turns hugging each other before exchanging encouraging words to reinforce their determination to win the Supercoppa Italiana. Their team spirit was overflowing since they had scored their 1st goal during the second minute of gameplay. They had obviously set themselves in the perfect position to win the fixture.

Chapter 524 Juventus At Its Best

Two men in black suits sat in the commentator's booth close to the top of the Jassim bin Hamad Stadium. One was Fabio Crudeli, a middle-aged man with a lean physique, while the other was Tiziano Caressa, an aged man with streaks of white in his hair. They were the two Italian sports journalists chosen to provide commentary for that year's Supercoppa Italiana.

The two men had ample experience and would never lack words for any situation on the field of play. They were like walking football dictionaries, and they would always effortlessly find perfect descriptions for any scenario happening during the game. They were true poets, and anyone listening to their commentary could vividly visualize the exact plays on the pitch even while not watching a game. If there were awards for commentators, maybe they would come in the second and third-best positions, with only Peter Drury, the British sports commentator, coming up ahead of them.

However, just two minutes into the Supercoppa Italiana, the two commentators were already faced with a situation that caused them to be at a loss for words. The light streaming into the commentary booth illuminated their stunned faces, and for a moment, they couldn't find the exact verbal portrayal of what they had just witnessed. They couldn't understand how Zachary had managed to pick out Carlos Tevez from a crowd of Napoli defenders and provide the defense-splitting pass that resulted in Juventus' first goal for the night.

"Well..." Tiziano Caressa, the aged man, sighed and took a deep breath as the cheers around the stadium started dying down. "That was unexpected. Don't you think so, Fabio?"

"Of course," Fabio Crudeli, the middle-aged commentator, replied. "It just took Juventus about 70 seconds to score their first goal of this Supercoppa. But even more surprising was the way they scored the goal. I have to say that it was the true definition of magic coming alive on the football field. Zachary Bemba received the ball deep in his half, and we all expected him to pass the ball to another midfielder or defender to maintain possession. But the young Maestro did what none of us, including the Napoli players, had expected. He went for the spectacular and took out the entire Napoli team with a single brilliant ball. His pin-point defense-splitting pass took the opponents out of the equation, and he managed to set up Carlos Tevez for the goal. In my book, this is one of those incidences where the assist is more breathtaking than the goal itself."

Tiziano Caressa, the other commentator, chuckled. "Zachary Bemba has just shown us what he can do even in the absence of Andrea Pirlo and Claudio Marchisio, the other two key players in Juventus' midfield. His awareness of the spaces around him, game reading, and ability to assess risks during crucial moments should be really exceptional. That was why he effortlessly spotted Carlos Tevez's run in a split second before providing the perfect pass to set up the goal."

On the field of play, the game was yet to restart due to Juventus' lengthy celebrations. The coaches hurriedly summoned Zachary to the sidelines and gave him a few instructions.

"Listen, Zachary," Maurizio Trombetta, the assistant coach in charge of the first team, said. "We don't need to force anything since we have already scored the 1st goal. So, over the next few minutes, let's settle down and play possession football. Let's pass the ball around slowly and confidently as we build up play and look for opportunities. Let's stay in control, and let's not create any chaotic situations on the pitch which might benefit Napoli. Understood?"

"Yes, coach," Zachary said, taking a quick glance at the pitch. The referee was about to restart the match. So, Zachary quickly stepped into the opponent's half to stop the referee from following through with the intended action.

"For us to play possession football," Coach Trombetta continued, "You'll have to drop deeper into the midfield when necessary. Try to open up the spaces in the middle of the pack by forming triangles with the rest of your teammates. You can occasionally play a through-ball to the strikers when you see fit. But please, don't try to force anything, as that will pointlessly give away our possession. Understood?"

"Yes, coach. I understand."

"Good," Coach Trombetta replied. "You can head back to the pitch."

Zachary nodded and quickly ran to his position. The referee glared at him, probably as a form of warning against his time-wasting behavior that delayed the restart. But he just apologized, and the referee let him be. He then took a deep breath and focused his senses in preparation for the action that was about to commence.

FWEEEEEEE

The referee finally blew the whistle after a few more seconds. The cheers resounded around the stadium, and Gonzalo Higuaín, Napoli's center forward, kicked off the game for the second time that evening. He kicked the ball and passed it 'further' back into his half to find Kalidou Koulibaly, one of Napoli's center-backs. It seemed that the striker had learned his lesson, and he was afraid of gifting possession to Juventus by passing the ball to his unreliable midfield.

In the backline, Kalidou Koulibaly controlled the ball effortlessly. The defender then flicked it to Raúl Albiol, the other center-back, who, in turn, passed it to Faouzi Ghoulam, the left-back.

Most likely, the Napoli players were trying to rebuild their confidence by playing short but sure passes at the back. So, their defenders continued passing the ball among their ranks without showing any intent to move it forward. It was as if they were provoking Juventus to come and get the ball — or else, they would continue playing pointless possession in their backline.

"High press... Go after the ball. Don't let them get comfortable and play." A loud shout reverberated from the touchline a few seconds later. It was from Max Allegri, the head coach of Juventus, and he was waving his arm animatedly to signal his players to high press the Napoli backline.

On hearing Coach Max Allegri's instructions, all the Juventus players went into action. They pushed forward like a pack of wolves with the intent to close down the spaces and freeze Napoli's passing game.

The two Juventus strikers and wing-backs went even a step further to man-mark the four Napoli defenders. They ran at the four Napoli players like a pack of wolves on the hunt, eventually forcing Kalidou Koulibaly to play the ball high and long. They had thus achieved their objective and frozen Napoli's pointless passing game at the back. What remained was for them to execute the next step of their game plan.

"Pa..."

The long ball from Kalidou Koulibaly was brought under control with an outstretched boot in the other half of the field, close to the border of Juventus' defensive third. The player in action was Leonardo Bonucci, one of Juventus' defenders. With fluid motions, he poked the ball forward with the tip of his boot. Then, before any of the opponents could close him down, he passed it to Arturo Vidal, one of Juventus' defensive midfielders, to kick-start a period of dominant possession for Juventus.

"Pa... Pa, Pa..."

The passes started flowing like water over the pitch as the Juventus players moved the ball around. They arrayed themselves in their customary 3-5-2 formation and played beautiful possession football that wowed critics and fans alike. They froze out Napoli, and by the 15th minute, they had already amassed an incredible ball possession statistic of 74%, while Napoli only had 26% of the ball.

Zachary, in particular, was especially impressive within the midfield. He followed the coach's instructions and didn't force anything. He didn't even try to execute risky dribbles but just adhered to the basics of passing and receiving the ball.

You give me the ball, and I pass it to another or return it to you. That was his policy throughout the opening fifteen minutes of gameplay.

Even at the most crucial moments, he would utilize the spaces well by relying on his enhanced game intelligence, graded at SS by the system. The opponents couldn't seem to find his trails on the pitch, as he was always floating around the opposing players' blind spots while occasionally moving into gaps. Moreover, by finding the most strategic positions in the middle of the pack, he often provided the best outlet for the ball, thus allowing Juventus to continue dominating possession. His midfield play was simply too spectacular, and even the commentators were not shy with their praises when talking about him.

"It's Zachary on the ball," Fabio Crudeli, the middle-aged commentator, said, his voice rising up a notch. "He turns and twists and passes it to Arturo Vidal, his counterpart in midfield. Arturo passes to Simone Padoin, who in turn passes back to Zachary. Oh! Juventus' midfield play is simply incredible. Their midfielders, especially Zachary and Vidal, are in top shape today. They look confident on the ball, and there's nothing the Napoli players could do to stop them."

"Yes, this is Juventus at its best," Tiziano Caressa, the other commentator, supplemented. "Before the game, I thought they would suffer in the absence of Claudio Marchisio and Andrea Pirlo, the two sidelined by injuries. But I couldn't have been more wrong. Zachary has stepped up his game to fill the shoes of the two missing experienced players. He's playing in a more intelligent fashion and helping his teammates to dominate the game. The Napoli players can't do a thing to stop him, and he has already conquered the midfield..."

"Oh, my! What do we have here?" Fabio Crudeli suddenly interrupted, his voice going up a notch. The commentator seemed excited as if something interesting had just transpired on the field of play.

"Zachary Bemba is finally willing to take a risk in this game," Fabio Crudeli continued as the cheers resounded. "He sidesteps, dribbles past David López, and accelerates into space. He looks up once and sends a diagonal ball to the right wing. Oh my, goodness me! He has just picked out Stephan Lichtsteiner, Juventus' wing-back, on the right flank. What an excellent through-ball! The attack is on, and the Juventus players are flying forward..."

Chapter 525 Making The Opponent Feel Hopeless

On the pitch, the highly agile Stephan Lichtsteiner was already cutting through the right flank like a high-speed Swizz express train. He fed the ball past Christian Maggio, Napoli's left-back, and beat the man for pace. Then, with the most pin-point of passes, he picked out Fernando Llorente, the Juventus striker, who happened to have just run into an unmarked pocket of space between the two Napoli center-backs.

"Pa..."

Fernando Llorente controlled the ball mid-stride without slowing down. He quickly accelerated toward Napoli's box, hoping to leave the opposing center-backs in the dust. However, his speed was not impressive enough, and only a few seconds later, Kalidou Koulibaly, the no-nonsense defender, caught up to him and tried to tackle the ball from him.

Fortunately for Juventus, Fernando Llorente was a very talented and experienced striker. Even though he wasn't that fast on his legs, he still utilized his body to protect the ball and lured a foul from Kalidou Koulibaly. Moreover, the striker managed to draw the reckless tackle in a position only some twenty-seven or so yards from Napoli's goal.

FWEEEEEEE

The referee blew the whistle immediately and awarded Juventus a free kick. He also fished out a yellow card from his pocket and showed it to Kalidou Koulibaly, the defender who had committed the foul.

"Zachary! Zachary..."

"Zachary..."

The Juventus fans behind Napoli's goal started chanting Zachary's name at the top of their voices. Of course, they hadn't forgotten that Zachary was one of the most clinical free kick takers in the entire world. As such, they were excited by the prospect of witnessing more magic from him as he converted yet another free kick.

"I will take the free-kick," Zachary declared as he quickly picked up the ball from the ground. Of course, none of his teammates, including Carlos Tevez, Arturo Vidal, and Stephan Lichtsteiner, tried to contest him for the ball. They all knew he was a better free-kick taker than them and thus left him to do what he usually did best.

"Phew..."

Inhaling deeply, Zachary strode forward and placed the ball on the spot marked by the referee. He then stepped back to observe the situation ahead of the box but not before activating the Dead-Ball Specialist

Juju. As usual, he wished to utilize the skill to increase his analytical abilities, which would, in turn, raise the probability of him converting the set piece successfully.

"DING"

Suddenly, a system notification resounded within Zachary's mind, causing him to furrow his brows. He was against interacting with the system during a game, as he didn't wish to draw unnecessary attention to himself. But he still maintained a poker face and listened to the system AI's following words.

"The system has detected that the user's game intelligence has already achieved the SS grading," the AI said. "The user has met all the conditions to master the Dead-Ball Specialist Juju completely. As such, from this moment forward, the user will not need to utilize Juju points to activate the skill."

Zachary's eyes lit up ever so slightly as he tried to contain his happiness. "Will the skill still help me to enter a state of extreme focus before I take a set piece? Will the skill also boost my spatial awareness and risk analysis core attributes while I am preparing to take a set piece?" He communicated with the system AI telepathically.

"Yes, to all questions," the system AI answered. "The Dead-Ball Specialist Juju has become a true-blue passive skill due to your high game intelligence and growing experience of converting free kicks. As long as you are about to take a set piece, your 'spatial awareness' and 'risk analysis' core attributes will rise to the next grade. They will ascend to the SSS grade before you take the set piece, thus increasing your conversion chances. Moreover, that will be at no cost of Juju points."

"Wonderful!"

Zachary's heartbeat quickened as he finished his telepathic conversation with the system AI. Taking a deep breath, he calmed his bubbly emotions down and started observing the situation before Napoli's box.

The referee was in the midst of arranging the wall roughly ten yards away from the free-kick spot. It was a five-player wall, with all the Napoli men positioned in the 'most strategic way' to block all shooting angles to the goal. Additionally, a player was lying behind the wall, probably to guard against a potential carpet shot from Zachary.

But that was not all. Zachary also noticed that the opponents were playing a high defensive line to create an offside trap for all those Juventus players who wished to rush into the box and connect with the set-piece ball. The Napoli men were obviously going all out to prevent Juventus from scoring another goal through a set piece.

Zachary's eyes took in all the placement of the players ahead as his enhanced game intelligence processed the information. The gears in his mind turned before quickly falling into place. He smiled and reminded himself that all Napoli's preparations didn't mean a thing if he made the perfect execution. As long as he found the ideal spot between the goalposts, the keeper and the defenders wouldn't be able to do a thing to stop the ball from finding its way into the back of the net.

FWEEEEEEE

It didn't take long for Paolo Valeri, the referee, to organize the wall and the players before Napoli's box. After a few seconds, he blew the whistle and motioned for Zachary to take the set piece.

Zachary had already prepared for the moment. He didn't waste a second before making an angled run toward the ball and swinging his leg at it. He used the inner toe area of his boot to wrap around the ball with the intention of unleashing a curling shot toward the goal.

"BAM!"

The sound of the boot meeting synthetic leather reverberated in his ears, and the ball soared from the ground before flying over the wall. At first, it was as if it was heading over the crossbar. However, a few seconds later, it dipped abnormally before descending and bouncing right in front of the Napoli keeper, who happened to have already committed himself to a full-body dive. The ball then bounced again and nestled into the back of the net, causing thunderous cheers to rise from the stands behind Napoli's goal.

Juventus FC 2 : SSC Napoli 0

"Oh goodness me!" Fabio Crudeli, the middle-aged commentator, yelled at the top of his voice as Zachary raised his arms to celebrate. "What a sensational goal! What a beauty! Zachary has just converted a free-kick from 27 yards away to score Juventus' second goal during the 18th minute of gameplay. This young man is flying, and no one can stop him when he stands before a free-kick. We might be witnessing the rise of the greatest free-kick taker in history."

"His technique is always a marvel to look at," Tiziano Caressa, the other commentator, chipped in. "He is always spot on with his execution when he stands before a set piece. I don't understand how he does it! His ability is scary."

"Well..." Fabio Crudeli chuckled. "If you're playing against Zachary, better not concede a free kick in the areas close to your goal. A free kick within the final third is like a penalty kick in his case. I can't even remember a time when he failed to convert a set piece in such areas."

On the sidelines, Rafael Benítez, the head coach of Napoli, was in a sour mood. He couldn't make sense of what was going on with his players. He had instructed them not to draw fouls in the final third, but they hadn't listened. They had conceded a free-kick less than thirty yards away from the goal and gifted Zachary the perfect chance to extend Juventus' lead to two goals. Coach Benítez couldn't contain his frustration.

Moreover, he had long noticed that his players were not working hard enough. Their concentration levels were also a bit off, and they committed many errors during the opening twenty minutes of the game. In particular, the midfielders were doing a poor job marking Zachary and Arturo Vidal, thus allowing Juventus to conquer the midfield. They were just like amateurs who could handle the pressure of the Supercoppa Italiana final.

"This can't go on," Rafael Benítez thought after watching for a few more minutes. He turned his gaze to the bench, and his eyes fell on two players.

"Dries Mertens and Jorginho!" He said after a few seconds of contemplation. "Start warming up. I want you on the pitch in less than six minutes."

"Yes, coach!" The two players replied and changed into their warm-up gear. Then, after chugging down some water, the two players quickly jogged away from the technical area and initiated their warm-up routine.

Rafael Benítez returned his focus to the field of play, feeling dejected. It was already the 32nd minute of gameplay. Marek Hamsik, the man who was Napoli's captain and attacking midfielder, had just committed another error. He had fumbled the ball close to the center circle and misplaced yet another pass, thus gifting free possession to Juventus.

Arturo Vidal, the Juventus midfielder, who happened to be close by, quickly pounced on the ball and intercepted it. Vidal then played it to Zachary, who speared into Napoli's half like an arrow just let loose from a bowstring.

Coach Rafael Benítez suppressed a shudder as he watched Zachary quickly bearing down on Napoli's goal. Benítez couldn't stop his heartbeat from quickening as Zachary skipped past David López, one of Napoli's holding midfielders, with a simple change of pace. Then, before the helpless Napoli coach could yell out instructions to his players, Zachary dug his boot under the ball and looped it over the defense to set up Fernando Llorente, one of the two Juventus strikers.

The attack was on. Fernando Llorente timed his run well and rushed into the space between the two Napoli center-backs. His long strides pumped like the pistons of a race car, and he effortlessly connected with the overhead ball from Zachary right after beating the offside trap.

What followed depended on Fernando Llorente himself, and the Spanish striker didn't disappoint. He didn't even try to control the ball but just extended his boot and guided the ball goalward. His execution was spot on, and he skillfully looped the ball over the keeper, who had unfortunately come out to greet him. He effortlessly found the back of the net and scored Juventus' third goal for the night during the 33rd minute.

Juventus FC 3 : SSC Napoli 0

"Damn!"

Coach Rafael Benítez felt like punching someone when he saw the ball homing into the back of the net. He was just about to make two substitutions so as to rectify Napoli's precarious situation on the field of play. But his players couldn't hold on for even a few minutes, and they gifted Juventus the 3rd goal during the 33rd minute of gameplay. It was simply frustrating.

Coach Benítez's even felt that the game was a done deal, and he couldn't visualize how his team would recover from a three-goal deficit. He was even having second thoughts about making the two substitutions as thoughts of giving up took root in his mind. That was what three goals within the opening thirty-two minutes could do to you. They could make you doubt yourself, and there wasn't a thing you would be able to do but take a more severe beating from the opponents. Football was that merciless to those who gave up early in the game.

"No, I can't give up," Coach Benítez resolved. "We must do our best until the very end. At least, let's begin with a small goal of winning the second half."

As an experienced coach, Rafael Benítez quickly discarded the thoughts of surrender. If he couldn't win the entire Supercoppa, he would at least try to win only the second half. His pride wouldn't allow him to merely sit back and take a merciless thrashing from Juventus, no matter how good a team they were.

Chapter 526 Overwhelming Victory

Coach Rafael Benítez finally introduced Dries Mertens and Jorginho into the game during the 38th minute. The two players came on for Marek Hamsik and Jonathan de Guzmán and quickly helped stabilize Napoli's situation on the field of play. But aside from that, they achieved nothing else due to the tenacity shown by the Juventus players on the field.

The Juventus players, on their part, didn't step on the brakes even after gaining the three-goal advantage. They continued playing beautiful possession football while doing everything possible to deny Napoli any chances of creating goal-scoring opportunities. They were like a well-oiled machine, and they utilized teamwork and individual brilliance to maintain their three-goal advantage until the half-time break.

The second half of the game commenced after the fifteen-minute break. The Napoli players seemed to have woken up and applied pressure on Juventus during the opening minutes of gameplay. They launched several counterattacks against Juventus and came close to scoring twice during the 49th and 57th minutes, respectively. However, their efforts were rendered fruitless by the unwavering spirit of

Juventus' defenders, and the score remained 3:0 in favor of the Old Lady throughout the second half's opening minutes.

As the game continued, the Juventus players eventually rectified the situation and regained dominance on the pitch. They exuded confidence on the ball and effortlessly outplayed Napoli for about a dozen minutes. Moreover, their possession of football also froze out the opponents, thus depriving them of the ability to create opportunities that could result in goals. Evidently, Juventus was in the driving seat, and they were managing the game well.

However, the excitement wasn't over, as the situation changed again during the 74th minute. That was because the Napoli players got a chance to counterattack after a failed wave of attack by Juventus.

It all started with Rafael Cabral, the Napoli keeper, making a save. The Napoli shot stopper executed a stunning dive and seized a powerful shot from Carlos Tevez out of the air. Then, before anyone could react, the keeper picked himself from the ground before running toward the edge of the box and making a one-handed throw to the left flank. His throwing technique was flawless, and he set up Dries Mertens, the substitute winger, for a counterattack.

Dries Mertens, on his part, was quick to advance the counterattack. He raced along the touchline like a whirlwind before skipping past Leonardo Bonucci, one of the only two remaining Juventus defenders between him and the goal. Dries Mertens then accelerated and cut into the pitch before squaring the ball to the middle to set up a perfect one-versus-one situation between Gonzalo Higuaín and Gianluigi Buffon, the Juventus keeper.

Cheers mixed with gasps of desperation arose from the stands as Gonzalo Higuaín, the highly clinical Napoli striker, controlled the ball right at the edge of the eighteen-yard box. The Argentine stepped forward confidently before squaring his body and kicking the ball with his instep. He was, of course, trying to score by surprising a keeper with a powerful drive toward the inside of the far post.

However, the Napoli man's decision couldn't have been more wrong.

Just as Gonzalo Higuaín's boot connected with the ball, Gianluigi Buffon, the highly experienced Juventus keeper, reacted instantaneously and put his body on the line. Buffon made himself big and lounged forward to throw his entire frame at the ball. His daring gamble paid off, and he blocked the ball with his knee and sent it toward the right side of the pitch.

"Clear the ball... Be fast..." An anxious roar came from the sidelines. It was from Max Allegri, and he was again doing his best to urge his players to solve the precarious defensive situation quickly. It seemed he was aiming for a clean sheet, and he didn't wish to see his team concede even a single goal against Napoli.

The Juventus defenders obviously didn't need any reminders and quickly solved the danger. Giorgio Chiellini pounced toward the descending ball and hammered it high and far toward the other side of the pitch before the opponents could close him down.

"Whoosh..."

The cleared ball from Giorgio Chiellini traveled high into the air, like a surface-to-surface missile heading to the other side of the pitch. A few seconds later, the earth's gravitational force acted on it, forcing it to descend towards the right flank.

"Pa..."

The sound of the ball meeting rock-hard chest muscles sounded ever so slightly. It was Zachary in action, and he had effortlessly leaped off the ground to bring the descending ball under control with his chest.

"Pa..."

The sound of a boot meeting synthetic fiber soon followed as Zachary looped the ball over an approaching Napoli player. Then, with the most spartan of touches, he again flicked the ball over another Napoli player, who tried to rob him from the side.

But Zachary didn't just stop at that and only finalized his display of skill after executing an elastico dribble to escape from an encirclement of three. He then accelerated to his top speed and initiated a daring sprint toward Napoli's box like a raging Tsunami.

"Zachary! Zachary..."

The Juventus fans in the stands began yelling Zachary's name as he cut across the field at breakneck speed. But he stayed calm and didn't let the noise affect his decision-making. He soon approached the box and unleashed a through-pass toward Carlos Tevez, who had just dashed into an unmarked pocket of space at the edge of the box.

Carlos Tevez, on his part, was not selfish with the ball. He didn't even spend time controlling it but just played it along into the path of Zachary, who was still sprinting toward Napoli's goal like a rocket.

One-Two! Through-Pass!

The lightning-fast exchange of passes between the two players was all it took to break through Napoli's defense again. Zachary circumvented Raúl Albiol, Napoli's center-back, before stepping into the box and connecting with the return ball from Carlos Tevez. He then curled the ball over the approaching goalkeeper and found the back of the net to score Juventus' 4th goal during the 76th minute.

Juventus 4 : SSC Napoli 0

"GOAAAL...."

Coach Max Allegri yelled like a madman when Zachary found the back of the net. His heart leaped for joy, and the curses from Rafael Benítez within Napoli's technical area sounded like music to his ears. The fact that he was only minutes away from winning yet another Supercoppa Italiana cheered his soul, making him feel like he was walking on clouds. He punched the air again and roared like a beast as his players celebrated the fourth goal.

"Damn!" Coach Max Allegri said after a few seconds. He wasn't cursing out of frustration but out of happiness. "Zachary has done it again. I don't know what happened to the boy over the past few days, but he looks sharper on the field of play. His decisions have been spot-on during the game, and I can't find any fault with his play. It's as if he matured in a short span of less than a week."

"Maybe, it's because of winning the Golden Boy award," Maurizio Trombetta, the assistant coach, replied uncertainly. "He might be that type of player who gains more confidence and maturity after winning major awards."

"Maybe, maybe not," Coach Max Allegri said. "Let's focus on the important stuff first. This game is already in the bag. We need to rest our key players. We must preserve them for the January games."

"Excellent plan, boss," Coach Trombetta agreed. "Who are we taking out?"

"Zachary, Tevez, and Arturo Vidal," Coach Max Allegri replied with a smile. "I'll replace them with Martín Cáceres, Federico Mattiello, and Roberto Pereyra. Those three should be able to help us weather the final minutes of the game without taking any damage."

"Good," Coach Trombetta said. "I'll go and tell them to warm up. They should be ready to join the proceeding in five minutes max."

The game restarted after the goal celebrations. Juventus still didn't let up the pressure and immediately robbed the ball from Napoli with high-pressing tactics. Then, from there on, they started moving the ball around the field meticulously to outplay Napoli.

Zachary was especially in Black Mamba mode. He continued playing like a Maestro in the middle of the pitch while searching for an opportunity to initiate another attack against Napoli.

Of course, he hadn't forgotten the milestones for the system's Supercoppa Italiana mission. He still yearned for a hat-trick that would allow him to win one of the shards required to master Ronaldinho's Step-Over and Feint Kingly Magic.

However, Zachary soon conceded that he could not realize his wish since Coach Max Allegri substituted him out of the game during the 81st minute. But again, he was not angry as he understood the coach's intentions, especially after noticing that Carlos Tevez and Arturo Vidal had also moved out of the pitch. Obviously, Allegri wanted to rest his players, and thus, Zachary had no right to question the man's decisions.

The Juventus players remaining on the field didn't rest on their laurels after the substitutions. They continued playing with tenacity and matching run-for-run against the opponents. They played compact and solid defensive football during the final moments and eventually won the game with a score of 4:0 after five minutes of injury time. They had finally emerged victorious from the Supercoppa Italiana battle and won their first silverware for the 2014/15 Italian football calendar.

Chapter 527 Another System Mission Completed

A day later, in the evening.

The clock hands had just pointed to the seven o'clock mark when Zachary arrived at the Ritz-Carlton, Doha, hotel's restaurant to attend Juventus' post-Supercoppa Italiana dinner.

The multitude of glowing lights within the hall shone upon him, illuminating his well-ironed black Armani suit and polished shoes. With a smile etched on his face, he stepped further into the hall, hoping to join his teammates, who had arrived earlier. In the meantime, he also didn't forget to continue observing his surroundings as he moved further into the hall.

The restaurant was painted in radiant colors of brown and gold that matched the immaculately arranged and stylish furniture. The long table close to the balcony overlooking the sea was especially eye-catching. Zachary naturally couldn't miss the several waiters and waitresses dressed in chic black and white uniforms that were busy placing dishes on it.

There were already mouth-watering premium sushi, sashimi, and ceviche served alongside fresh fish, meat, and various vegetable soups on the table. There were also several foreign dishes Zachary had never seen, supplemented with colorful vegetable salads to complete the setup.

Zachary noted that a few of his teammates had gathered around the table. They were in the midst of selecting the dishes they wanted while the servers poured wine and soft drinks for them.

"Zachary! You are here!"

A familiar voice sounded from behind him. Turning around to look, Zachary noticed that Maurizio Trombetta, the assistant coach, had, at some point, arrived behind him. The man seemed to have gone all out to dress for the party. His black suit, white shirt, bowtie, and shining black shoes all outlined his elegance, making him look like a filthy-rich aristocrat.

"Coach!" Zachary exclaimed. "You are smart today."

"Thanks," Coach Trombetta said with a smile. "Your get-up is also not bad. I'm guessing you'll be able to wow all the pretty ladies attending the party. How envious!"

Zachary chuckled but chose not to comment. "Coach! I sent in a vacation request to you and the head coach yesterday. I wish to stay in Doha until the football calendar resumes in January."

"I discussed your request with the boss today morning," Coach Trombetta said. "We have no problem with your staying in Doha for the Christmas break. But please endeavor to return to Turin before 3rd January. We will be commencing our preparation for our Serie A game against Inter Milan then."

"I will do that. Thanks for your consideration, coach."

Coach Trombetta smiled and patted Zachary's shoulder. "We're here to enjoy and relax but not to talk about plans and whatnot. Let's pick up some food and join the rest."

"Okay."

Zachary walked with Coach Trombetta to the long table at the other end of the hall. He exchanged small talk with his teammates while picking up food before settling on a table at a far corner. He then busied himself with savoring his meal while occasionally conversing with teammates and coaches who would stop by his table. Zachary was having a good time relaxing after winning the Supercoppa Italiana.

Zachary's eyes would, from time to time, land on the glittering trophy on the high table in the middle of the room. Then, moments from the previous night would flood his mind, and he would vividly recall scoring two goals and providing two assists during the game before lifting the Supercoppa trophy with his teammates. It was a night to remember, especially since the prize was his first silverware with Juventus.

Additionally, Zachary was overflowing with joy, especially after he had completed yet another system mission by winning the Supercoppa. His being the Supercoppa man of the match was an indisputable fact. As such, he had naturally realized two mission objectives that allowed him to win an S-grade Agility Enhancement Elixir and some Juju points. He was obviously taking steady steps to elevate his skills.

The dinner continued, and a few minutes later, a familiar and elegant woman wearing a glamorous maroon dress approached Zachary's table. She had blue eyes, smooth skin, and long wavy dark brown hair that cascaded down her shoulders. She was Emily Anderson, his agent, and she was Zachary's plus-one at Juventus' dinner party. They should have arrived together at the venue, but a few issues had delayed her.

Emily smiled as she settled down opposite Zachary. "Sorry, I'm late," she said while positioning her plate of food before her. "It has been long. How are you doing?"

"I'm doing fine." Zachary grinned. "What about you?"

"I'm also okay," she replied while forking a piece of meat from her plate. "But I'm quite busy these days."

"Oh!" Zachary took a moment to glance at her as she swallowed down her food. "I thought you arrived in Doha yesterday night! What delayed you?"

"Well..." Emily said a bit hesitantly. "I was actually meeting up with the Nike representatives. They were also here in Doha for the game, and due to your performance, they are growing more interested in offering you a juicier long-term deal. But we haven't reached any agreement yet."

"Oh, okay," Zachary said but didn't ask for details. Emily was a skilled and reliable agent. Zachary trusted her to handle all negotiations on his behalf. He didn't need to micro-manage her.

"So, Zachary!" Emily glanced up from her plate. "What are your plans for January? There's the African Cup of Nations coming up. Aren't you going to represent your country?"

"Nope," Zachary said, lowering his voice. "I'm not going to participate in the AFCON. I'm in the process of switching my citizenship to Ivory Coast, another African country."

"For real!" Emily's eyes widened. "Are you going to represent another country but not your home country?"

"Please lower your voice," Zachary said, his heart skipping a beat for some reason. "I don't wish for others to know yet."

"Okay," Emily conceded, "But why is it my first-time hearing this?"

"Well... I decided on this only a few months ago and immediately started the process. I had always meant to talk to you about it, but different things would always come up, and I would often forget about the issue. Sorry!"

"Zachary..." Emily sighed, seemingly deflated. "This is irresponsible behavior. I'm your agent. So, why not talk to me about the decisions that concern your football career? There are a lot of benefits that you could have gotten before switching citizenship. But since you've already initiated the process, there's nothing much I can do to get you those benefits."

"Sorry..." Zachary said with a smile. "But I really don't mind missing out on the benefits. My only goal is to get opportunities to compete in international competitions. Monetary benefits are just a plus."

"If you say so." Emily sighed again. She glanced around the hall, and her eyes naturally floated to the glittering trophy on the table in the middle of the room. She smiled and said to Zachary, "Congratulations upon winning your first silverware with Juventus, by the way. I watched the game, and I was really impressed by the way you handled yourself. Keep up the good work."

"Thanks..."

As the two of them conversed, the dinner party finally moved on to the stage of speeches. Fabio Paratici, the sporting director, was the first to address the gathering. He thanked all the players and coaches for their impressive work ethic and congratulated them upon winning the Supercoppa. He then concluded with a few encouraging words before handing over the floor to Max Allegri, the Juventus head coach.

Max Allegri, on his part, didn't say much. He only congratulated the players and commended their efforts during the Supercoppa before telling them to enjoy themselves. He then stepped off the stage and allowed the party to move on to the socializing phase of the night.

Zachary was not interested in the social events, which included dancing and making pointless small talk with people who were already tipsy after taking more than a few glasses of wine. He said his goodbyes to his coaches and parted with Emily in the hotel lobby. Then, a few minutes later, he returned to his room and washed up before jumping into bed.

It was then he recalled the Supercoppa Italiana system mission. He had completed it the previous night but decided against utilizing his rewards since he was already as tired as a dog after playing more than eighty minutes of intensive football.

But now, since he was already well-rested, it was a different story. He started to seriously consider the option of using the S-grade agility-enhancing elixir as soon as possible. However, he had to ascertain first whether the elixir's effects would negatively affect his skills and hinder him from performing at his best after the football season restarted in January.

"System," he called out. "Bring up the mission completion details for the 2014 Supercoppa Italiana Challenge."

"DING"

"Command received," the AI said, and the space before Zachary shimmered as a translucent crystal-like display appeared. It was the system interface, and inscribed on it were the mission completion details.

#5 new messages

CONGRATULATIONS

->You have completed the system mission (2014 Supercoppa Italiana Challenge).

->Mission Summary

*Objective 1: Become the leading playmaker for the 2014 Supercoppa Italiana final by providing the most assists during the game (Completed by providing two assists that resulted in goals; Rating S; Rewarded 5,000 Juju points).

*Objective 2: Help Juventus win the 2014 Supercoppa Italiana final by scoring at least one goal during the game. (Completed by scoring two goals that helped Juventus defeat Napoli during the Supercoppa; Rating S; Rewarded 10,000 Juju points).

*Objective 3: Become the Man of the Match for the 2014 Supercoppa Italiana final (Completed; Rating S+; Rewarded S-grade Agility Enhancement Elixir).

*Objective 4: Score a hat trick during the 2014 Supercoppa Italiana final (Not completed; Rating B; Rewarded 0 Juju points).

->Overall Mission Rating: S

->Mission Rewards

1) A total of 15,000 Juju-points

2) An S-grade Agility Enhancement Elixir

->Bonus Rewards

You have earned 5,000 Bonus Juju points.

A sense of contentment filled Zachary's heart. He contemplated for a moment before his eyes fell on the S-grade Agility enhancement elixir that could potentially elevate his agility and dribbling skills by an entire grade.

"System!" He called out in his mind. "Will there be any side effects if I consume the S-grade agility enhancement elixir? And two, will its effects hinder me from performing at my best come January when the football season restarts?"

"DING"

"There will be a few side effects as the S-grade elixir will push your agility to a new grade in only a short span of a few hours," the AI replied. "You won't be able to control your body well, and naturally, you'll find it hard to execute your skills fluidly over the next few days."

"How many days are we talking about exactly?" Zachary inquired.

"Ten days, give or take," the AI replied. "However. with your SS-grade game intelligence, you should be able to overcome the side effects of the elixir in roughly ten days. Of course, you'll have to go through a targeted training routine to achieve the desired result."

"Excellent!" Zachary couldn't contain his happiness. Juventus' next game would be against Inter Milan on Tuesday, 6th January 2015. That implied that he had a full thirteen days to undergo targeted training

and overcome the side effects of the S-grade elixir. In essence, nothing was stopping him from consuming the S-grade agility enhancement elixir.

Chapter 528 SS-Grade Agility

The S-grade agility enhancement elixir looked like a small red berry with glittering lights enveloping it. Inhaling deeply, Zachary summoned it from the system inventory and swallowed it in a single gulp.

What followed was what he pretty much expected. A refreshing feeling spread from his stomach and washed over his entire body. Then, a tingling sensation spread across his spine and extended toward his mind. He swallowed hard as his muscles started to spasm, and before he could adapt, his eyes rolled backward, and everything turned dark. The elixir had caused him to black out again, and he fell back into his bed without any awareness of what was around him.

The following morning...

"This is ten percent luck, twenty percent skill... fifteen percent concentrated power of will. Five percent pleasure, fifty percent pain, and a hundred percent reason to remember the name..."

The familiar beat of Fort Minor's 'Remember the Name' hit single woke Zachary up the following morning. It was his ringtone, and on hearing it, his eyes opened, and he took in everything around him.

Suddenly, he felt the world he perceived had somehow changed, as everything seemed to be in slow motion. The swaying of the curtain in the morning breeze was a bit off, while the sounds picked up by his ears were more drawn out. For a few moments, he was in a bizarre state, and it seemed like he was watching his hotel room from another dimension. Then, just as he blinked, everything returned to normal, and the feeling disappeared, seemingly as if it had just been an illusion.

"The effects of the system's elixirs are growing more and more bizarre as they improve in grade."

Zachary pushed himself off the bed and focused his senses. The morning sunrays streamed through the shy gap between the curtains and illuminated his facial features. He smiled, feeling refreshed. Obviously, the S-grade agility enhancement elixir had done wonders and allowed him to perceive the world in a slightly different mode from before.

"Who could be calling at this time of the morning?"

Zachary had forgotten to put his phone in silent mode the previous night. It continued ringing and repeating the same chorus of Fort Minor's Remember the Name hit single to capture his attention.

Zachary groaned and picked up the phone from the table. After glancing at the screen, he smiled as the call was from Samson Damata, the coach from Lubumbashi, DRC.

"Hello, coach!" Zachary said after accepting the call.

"Hello, Zachary!" The coach replied in Kiswahili. "Let me start by congratulating you upon winning the Supercoppa and the Golden Boy award."

"Thanks, coach," Zachary responded.

"How are you doing these days?"

"I'm doing okay. Just pushing on to constantly improve my skills and become a better player. Aside from that, there's nothing else going on in my life."

"Great to hear that. Your grandma would be proud of you if she were still around. May her soul rest in peace."

"That's very kind. Thanks."

"Zachary!" Coach Damata's voice turned a bit solemn. "Did you decide to change your citizenship to another country? There's a rumor floating around that you'll be representing Ivory Coast during international football games. Is that true?"

Zachary's heartbeat quickened. He had only told Emily about switching his citizenship to Ivory Coast the previous night. She would obviously not leak the news to anyone as she was a reliable agent who

prioritized his needs above everything else. So, how did Coach Damata, who was all the way in DR Congo, find out about the issue?

"Coach!" He said a bit hesitantly. "Where did you hear this rumor?"

"You didn't deny it," Coach Damata said, sighing. "The claim must be true. The rumor originated from the Twitter account of an upcoming Italian journalist named Fabrizio Romano. In his post, he claimed that you would not represent DR Congo but Ivory Coast in the near future. He also claimed that the information is totally reliable since he obtained it from a reliable source within CAF."

A light bulb went on in Zachary's head, and he finally knew who had leaked the information. Most likely, Ivory Coast had submitted the change of citizenship certification papers to Africa's football governing body, hoping to meet the requirements for him to participate in the AFCON as an Ivorian. However, the CAF officials had probably not kept the matter confidential and leaked it to Fabrizio Romano and a few other journalists. That should be how the information got out.

Zachary sighed and inhaled deeply. He didn't wish to lie to the coach, who had been a friend to his late grandma. He switched the phone to his other ear and said, "Coach! The information is true. I will not be representing DRC during internationals but Ivory Coast."

There were a few seconds of silence at the other end of the line before Coach Damata spoke again. "Why?" He asked. "You were born in DR Congo! Why change citizenship to another country?"

"Well..." Zachary inhaled deeply and informed the Coach about his desire for glory during international competitions like the World Cup. In as few words as possible, he ensured that the coach understood his reasons for joining the Ivory Coast side before ending his explanation.

Coach Damata, on his part, seemed utterly depressed after hearing Zachary's reasons for changing his citizenship. But as an elder, he still said encouraging words to Zachary and exchanged some more small talk with him. Then, after wishing him success in his international career, the coach said his goodbyes and ended the call.

"This is really not easy."

Zachary shook his head after ending the call. Talking to Coach Damata had filled him with a feeling of guilt. But again, as a player yearning for big things, he quickly pushed the negative thoughts to the back of his mind. He would not change his decision to play for Ivory Coast as that was the most likely way for him to gun for the World Cup while representing an African nation.

As for representing DR Congo, he would no longer think about that. His home country had a lot of challenges, including underfunding of the sports sector and corruption on the managerial level. All those problems prevented DRC's national team from achieving any football success on the international scene. So, Zachary was better off helping his country in other areas, like building schools and football academies, instead of playing football, which would most likely not achieve anything for them.

"System!" Zachary said, returning his focus to the important matters at hand. "Please bring up my physical fitness and soccer technique attributes."

"DING"

"Command received. User's fitness attributes coming up shortly."

A soft smile lit up Zachary's face as he pushed all the depressing stuff to the back of his mind. He blinked his eyes reflexively and focused on the information that had just appeared on the translucent crystal-like display before him.

*USER STATS

->Physical Fitness (Av. Rating: S+)

Balance and Coordination: S- (S+)

Agility: SS

Strength: S+

Stamina: S+

Endurance Points: 17,500/18,000 (S+)

->Soccer Technique: [Av. Rating: S+]

Ball Control: S+

Dribbling Skills: S- (base stat still to be determined)

Passing Accuracy: S+

Body Control: A+ (S+)

NB: The grades in the brackets represent the user's base stats or, in other words, the user's attributes while not under the influence of the elixir's side effects.

Zachary's nodded after reading through his new stats. As expected, the S-grade agility-enhancement elixir had pushed his agility attribute to the SS-grading. He was now among the Juventus players with the highest agility on the squad.

Over the past month, he had utilized the system's snooping tool to spy on the stats of his teammates. Most of them only had an agility stat of S-, and even a player like Stephan Lichtsteiner, known as the Swizz Express because of his daring speedy runs through the wings, only possessed an agility statistic of S+. Perhaps, the only player in Juventus that could match Zachary's enhanced speed and agility was Carlos Tevez, the Argentine striker.

"With an SS grade agility," Zachary thought, "I can probably take my game to another level."

Agility was a crucial attribute for both attackers and defenders in football. On the sporting field, high agility could allow the player to react quickly to a stimulus, often presented by an opponent's movement, before a change of direction or speed. The attribute was the crucial determinant of how swiftly the player could transition from one motion to another without impacting his balance. As such, exceedingly agile footballers like Lionel Messi, Arjen Robben, and Cristiano Ronaldo could stop quickly, change directions, and keep moving in one fluid movement. They were the true-blue stars of the game due to their exceptionally high agility.

Zachary had always yearned to increase his agility attribute so as to become swifter on the ball and more deadly with his dribbling skills. He often dreamt of utilizing high agility and potent dribbling to break deadlocks and impact games. He wanted to evolve into a true-blue ball wizard the world had never seen, and now, he was just a step closer to that goal.

"I wonder what Messi's agility is?" Zachary pondered. He had a gut feeling that once-in-a-generation players like Messi, Cristiano Ronaldo, and Ronaldinho all possessed SSS-graded agility. That was why they could easily play around with top defenders in all the top leagues just by relying on their dribbling skills.

"I should focus on improving myself step by step." Zachary resolved.

The S-grade agility enhancement elixir had lowered his 'Body Control' and 'Balance and Coordination' stats to the A+ and S- grading, respectively. So, his next step was to undergo targeted training to overcome the side effect while also pushing his dribbling skills to the next level. Moreover, he had to overcome the side effect within thirteen days max or risk playing against Inter Milan while not at his best.

Chapter 529 Marked Improvement Over The Christmas Holiday

Rumors about Zachary changing his football allegiance from DR Congo to Ivory Coast continued floating around the internet throughout the Christmas holiday. But of course, most football fans, especially in Europe and South America, took them in with a grain of salt as they were yet to hear any official statement from Zachary's publicity team. Moreover, they couldn't conceptualize why Zachary would change citizenship from one African country to another.

As far as the fans were concerned, all African nations were 'weak ants' that would not go far in international football competitions. So, why would Zachary initiate the cumbersome process of switching citizenship to another African country? Why would he escape one hopeless nation and join yet another? Why not join powerhouses like France, Belgium, or the Netherlands that could increase his chances of gunning for the world cup? Most fans outside of Africa were that skeptical about the rumors concerning Zachary's alleged change of citizenship.

The days went by quickly, with neither Zachary's team nor the Ivory Coast officials confirming the news. And as Christmas Day approached, most football fans worldwide began to dismiss the rumors about Zachary's change of nationality as pure lies. But then December 26th, the day known as Boxing Day, arrived, and everything was made clear by a hint from Sidy Diallo, the Ivory Coast Football Federation president.

During an interview with a reporter from The Guardian, the president was asked whether the rumors about Zachary were true. Sidy Diallo, the man himself, smiled and replied, "The tittle-tattle about Zachary Bemba switching citizenship to Ivory Coast is obviously false. His mother is from Ivory Coast, so the boy is not changing his citizenship status. He is simply returning home after spending some time away. I don't get why that is a surprise."

"Mr. President!" The Guardian reporter said after quickly catching the hint. "Does that imply that Zachary will represent Ivory Coast during international football competitions? Will he play for the Ivorian national football team during the upcoming African Cup of Nations?"

"I can't speak about what will happen in the future as I'm not God," the president replied. "But I can say with a hundred percent certainty that Zachary Bemba is in the process of returning home. We're processing the necessary documentation, and he should be ready to join us for international friendlies

later in the year. As for the AFCON, that won't be possible unless something unexpected happens. That's all."

The clarification from the Ivorian Football Federation president finally cleared the air, and fans and critics around the globe began to believe the gossip about Zachary changing his football allegiance to Ivory Coast. They then took to the internet and started discussing the matter on various social media platforms.

"At least he didn't switch to one of the filthy rich European or Arab countries," a netizen commented in response to the post concerning Zachary's change of nationality on The Guardian's page. "He can still promote African football while playing for a country that obviously has more chances to go further in international competitions, like the World Cup."

"I feel sorry for DR Congo," another netizen commented with regretful emojis. "They have lost so many exceptional players to rich countries. Players like Romelu Lukaku, Christian Benteke, Vincent Kompany, Michy Batshuayi, and Steve Mandanda could have all teamed up to make a dream team for DR Congo. But alas, all those talented players were snatched up by rich countries. And now, another upcoming and talented prospect (Zachary Bemba) has already been snatched. Moreover, it's not by a rich European country but another African country! Shame! Shame! Shame!"

"I'm not complaining," another netizen commented. "I'm from Ivory Coast, and I can't wait to see Zachary team up with midfield general - Yaya Touré."

"I don't care what anyone says," a critic posted. "However, Zachary is just a typical greedy player. He has betrayed his homeland and sold his services to another team with big bucks. Truly a disappointment..."

In the meantime, Zachary was still 'enjoying' his Christmas holiday in Doha, Qatar. He didn't care in the slightest about the internet debate about him since he was busy undergoing targeted training to overcome the side effects of the S-grade agility-enhancing elixir.

He had consulted Bjørn Peters, his fitness trainer, who had readily designed a training routine to match his goals. And throughout the Christmas holiday, he had been following that very routine to stabilize his 'Body Control' and 'Balance and Coordination' stats while also improving his dribbling skills. He was so focused on his training and naturally had no time to concern himself with the chatter and rumors on the web.

Every morning, Zachary would start his day with a light morning jog. Then, after breakfast, he would go through a light gym session before eating another light snack and heading to one of the indoor training turfs near his hotel.

On the training turf, Zachary would go through several agility and coordination drills, which included Side Shuffles, Carioca Sideways Runs, Lateral Ladders, Shuttle runs, Cone Work, Ball Work, and other similar routines. Then, after enjoying a sumptuous lunch at his hotel, he would rest or go on a tour around Doha for the rest of the day before going to bed early and then resuming the same routine the following day.

Zachary was in beast training mode. He was consistent in his endeavors, and by January 1st, 2015, he had already accomplished some incredible results. His 'Body Control' and several other stats had already jumped all the way past the previous S grades and risen to the SS grading. For sure, Zachary's stats were improving at a much faster rate than he could have previously expected.

Zachary was so astonished by his rapid progress, but at the same time, also encouraged to continue with his training. He couldn't rest on his laurels before he digested all the benefits of the S-grade mental-conditioning and agility-enhancing elixirs he had consumed over the past few weeks. He was super motivated.

Zachary turned his entire training focus to his dribbling skills after overcoming the side effects of the S-grade agility-enhancing elixir. He spent most hours of his next two days on the training turfs in Doha while tirelessly going through Cone Weaves, Zigzag Slaloms, Diagonal Dribbles, Square Turns, Shuttle Runs, and several other exercises to improve his dribbling.

Zachary worked himself like a maniac, and by the end of January 2nd, he finally digested all the benefits of the S-grade agility-enhancing elixir. He pushed his dribbling skills stat to the SS grading and returned to his hotel feeling like a king.

Later in the evening, after enjoying a room service dinner, he washed up and packed his luggage in preparation for his return back to Turin the following morning. He finished everything by 8:30 PM and

settled on his bed in his nightwear. He was ready to check his training progress on the system interface before entering between the sheets to rest for the night.

"System!" Zachary called out in his mind. "Please bring up the breakdown of all my attributes."

"DING"

"Command received. The breakdown for the user's attributes will be coming up shortly."

The dim fluorescent light illuminated the hotel room's interior while highlighting the smile on Zachary's face. He inhaled deeply before focusing on the information that had just manifested on the crystal-like display that had appeared before him.

*USER STATS (Breakdown)

->Physical Fitness (Av. Rating: S+)

Balance and Coordination: SS

Agility: SS

Strength: S+

Stamina: S+

Endurance Points: 17,500/18,000 (S+)

->Soccer Technique: [Av. Rating: SS]

Ball Control: SS

Dribbling Skills: SS

Passing Accuracy: SS

Body Control: SS

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

Spatial Awareness: SS

Tactical Knowledge: S+

Risk Assessment: SS

->Mental Ability and Mindset: (Av. Rating: S+)

Soccer Passion: SS

Composure and Mental Strength: SS

Coachability: A+

Self-Motivation: SS

->X-Factor (Av. Rating: SS)

Consistency Factor: SSS

Luck Factor: SS

Supernormal Factor: S+

Match Winning Factor: SSS

"This is crazy!

Zachary was both shocked and excited beyond measure after perusing through his stats. Happiness resonated through him. He even jumped from the bed and executed a series of wiggly dance steps in his hotel room.

Ever since the time he consumed the S-grade mental-conditioning elixir, his stats had been rising like a rocket. First and foremost, his game intelligence had soared to the SS grading. Then, he performed

incredibly well during the Supercoppa and won the S-grade agility-enhancing elixir, which continued enhancing his stats. His agility had later risen to the SS grading after roughly ten days of training, and he had also pushed his dribbling skills to the same grade.

But that was not all.

In addition to improving his agility and game intelligence, he had also gained a boost in all his football skills, thus pushing his Ball Control, Dribbling Skills, Passing Accuracy, and Body Control to the SS grading. His other attributes, including Mental Ability and X-Factor, had also evolved and risen to the same grade. He was a totally different version of the player he was a month ago.

"But what happened?" Zachary wondered. "System! Why are my stats experiencing a meteoric rise within a short span of just weeks?"

"DING"

"The user's rapid progress boils down to three phases," the AI replied. "One, the user gained unmatched confidence after winning the Golden Boy award. And with that, there was an associated increase in mental ability and a culmination of ball skills."

"Two," the AI continued, "The user utilized the S-grade mental-conditioning elixir and pushed his game intelligence to the SS grade. With the increase in the game intelligence, the user finally met the conditions to evolve his game after a period of dedicated training. And that also allowed the user to utilize all his skills in the most effective way."

"Three, the user triumphed over Napoli during the Supercoppa and won his first silverware with Juventus. He also won an S-grade agility elixir from the system, which pushed his already close-to-breakthrough agility to the SS grade. And with the breakthrough, there were even more benefits. The user evolved all his ball skills and Balance and Coordination stats to the SS grading. All in all, the user should note that the origin of everything is the increment in the game intelligence attribute. And as long as the user can improve his game intelligence to another level, he will always be close to achieving breakthroughs in other aspects."

"Oh!"

Zachary finally saw the light. Most of his stats that had experienced a dramatic rise over the past few weeks depended on the game intelligence stat. Be it Ball Control, Dribbling Skills, Passing Accuracy, and Body Control — they all required high spatial awareness, impeccable risk analysis, and exceptional tactical knowledge for perfect execution. It was a simple truth as a player wouldn't be able to utilize spaces well to execute dribbles or unleash pin-point passes without a matching level of intelligence.

Of course, physical fitness also mattered. For instance, after Zachary consumed the S-grade agility-enhancement elixir, he evolved his agility to the SS grading. He then gained the ability to make movements quicker, and that allowed his ball skills to improve to a higher level. He was now able to react to an incoming ball faster or swiftly change directions almost instantaneously to escape a tackle. All in all, everything boiled down to his marked increase in game intelligence coupled with his SS-grade agility.

"Sweet! With these stats, I can finally refine my ball skills to an unbelievable level. Maybe, I'll be able to match those once-in-a-generation players within the next half of the season."

Zachary's hopes had already soared into the night skies of Doha. Inhaling deeply to calm himself down, he dismissed the system interface and finished his preparations for his trip back to Turin.

Then, at around nine, after chugging down some warm water, he jumped into bed and soon entered the warm embrace of a relaxing slumber. He had finally finished his Christmas holiday training, and all that remained was for him to return to Turin and wow all the opponents and football fans alike.

Chapter 530 Eve Of The Match Against Inter Milan

Zachary took a flight from Doha to Turin the following morning. After arriving and resting for a night at his mansion, he headed to the Vinovo, where he linked up with his teammates and coaches to go through his first official training with Juventus in the new year.

The winter in Turin was mild, with daily temperatures much warmer than those he had previously experienced while staying in Trondheim, Norway. Zachary felt that the weather was perfect, and he was in his best state while performing the various tactical drills under the supervision of the coaching staff.

His enhanced stats were already working wonders on the field, and nothing could stop him from outperforming his teammates on the training ground. He was like a true ball wizard on the pitch, and

whether it was perfect dribbles or pin-point passes through a hoard of players, he continually executed them flamboyantly like the best of Maestros. He performed so well over the two days of training to the point of amazing his coaches and teammates alike.

"Zachary!" Patrice Evra, the French left-back, called out to him after training on Monday evening. The two of them had already finished taking a shower. They were, at the moment, heading to the tactics room for the pre-game tactical meeting that preceded their home battle against Inter Milan.

"What's up, Patrice?" Zachary said while slowing down his steps to wait for the Frenchman.

Evra smiled and patted Zachary's back. "You were so badass on the training ground today. Your skills are improving at an abnormal rate. What is your secret?"

"Secrets are not meant to be shared," Zachary responded with a chuckle. "That aside, you look well-rested after taking all that time off. Did your injury heal well?"

Evra grinned. "Well... you saw me during training! Didn't you? I can now say that I'm as fit as a fiddle. I'm only waiting for Coach Max to give me an opportunity to make a comeback during an official match. Let's hope the boss will give me a chance during tomorrow's game against Inter Milan."

"Congratulation upon your successful recovery," Zachary said with a smile. "With your return, we have more than enough squad depth to maintain our perfect winning streak. By the way, what is the status of Andrea and Marchisio? Are they recovering well?"

"Yes..." Evra replied while quickening his step to match Zachary's long strides. "Pirlo should be fully fit within two weeks, give or take. He should return to the squad before our Serie A home game against Chievo Verona. Claudio Marchisio, on the other hand, needs more time. He can only achieve complete recovery around the first week of February."

"That's all good news." Zachary smiled. "With their return, we'll head into our next Champions League fixture with our strongest side."

Evra furrowed his brows. "We'll be facing Bayer 04 Leverkusen from German. Right?"

"Yes, that's true. We'll face Bayer 04 Leverkusen away from home in the first leg of the Round-of-Sixteen on February 25th. Then, on March 17th, we'll host them in Turin for the return game.

"Oh!" Evra exclaimed, seemingly thinking about something. "Bayer 04 Leverkusen's coach is Roger Schmidt. He's a tricky one and not easy to defeat. I have watched a few of their games this season, including the one against Borussia Dortmund. They are a team that plays good attacking football under their coach. If we're not careful, we might not easily overcome them."

"Yes," Zachary agreed. "Their coach is one of the most underrated coaches in Europe. He was formerly the coach of Red Bull Salzburg. He gave my former team a hard time when we played against him during last year's Europa League. He likes playing counterattacking football, and I guess he will do the same thing when he meets us during the Champions League Round-of-Sixteen stage."

"That's a given..." Evra said. "But I still believe no team can stop us this season if we play at our best. We have the capability to beat the world's best teams, including Bayern Munich, Barcelona, and Real Madrid. What could bring us down are game tactics, squad selections, and injuries. Nothing else!"

"Don't jinx us," Zachary said.

Evra shook his head and pursed his lips. "I heard the news about you joining the Ivory Coast National team. I guess we'll be enemies during international competitions from now on."

"Yeah! You better be prepared. Otherwise, you'll be in for a serious walloping when we play against you."

"Dream on!" Evra chuckled again. "But can I ask why Ivory Coast? Why not join another country with better prospects?"

"Well... My biological mother is from Ivory Coast, and my gut feeling tells me I will fit well in the team. Additionally, they are one of the few African countries with many upcoming young footballers on the international scene. If I join them, we'll have all the arsenal we need to gun for the late stages of the World Cup as an African nation."

"Oh! So, your dream is to win the World Cup with an African nation?"

"Yes, that's my dream. And I guess it's the dream of many African footballers who have ever played in the big leagues."

Evra sighed. "That's a noble dream, my friend. But it will be hard. I wish you all the luck as you try to realize it..."

The two of them continued talking until they entered the tactics room. Zachary parted with Evra and conversed with a few teammates and coaches for the next few minutes. Then, when 5:00 PM arrived, he found a random seat and settled down to listen to Coach Max Allegri's address.

Coach Max Allegri, on his part, spoke for only an hour. He first welcomed the team back from the Christmas Holiday before explaining the tactics for the game against Inter Milan. He then read out the squad and assigned individual roles to the players that made his starting line-up before concluding the tactics meeting.

Zachary thought about the tactics as he drove back to his mansion later that evening. Coach Max Allegri had totally switched up Juventus' tactics for the game against Inter Milan, and the team would be utilizing a new 4-3-1-2 formation instead of their traditional 5-3-2 formation. Moreover, the coach had also given Evra, the player from injury, a starting position as the left back. The tactics and line-up confused Zachary, and he wondered what was going on through the coach's mind.

"We also won't be utilizing any wingers during the game. We only have the left and right defensive midfielders in our squad. They aren't wingers in the traditional sense of football, and I wonder whether they can deliver enough crosses into the opponent's box!"

Zachary continued thinking about Max Allegri's tactics as he guided his Audi RS 7 into the driveway leading to his mansion. He parked the car in front of the house before picking his gym bag out of the back seat and heading towards the house.

The clock hand pointed to the 7:45 PM mark when he stepped into his mansion. All the other house occupants, including Bjørn Peters, Inger, and the maids, were still awake. They greeted him enthusiastically and asked him about his day.

Zachary replied to all their queries with a smile etched on his face before enjoying a light dinner and heading to his room for the night. As usual, he didn't forget to go through his pre-bedtime yoga routine to relax his muscles after a tiring training session. Then, as the clock hands pointed to the 9:15 mark, he washed up and jumped into bed to rest for the night.

Zachary wanted to sink into a relaxing slumber as soon as possible. He hoped to enjoy more than eight hours of rest so as to allow his body to return to its peak condition before the following day's match against Inter Milan. He wanted to do everything right in order to achieve the best state possible during the game.

However, when he got in between the sheets, sleep wouldn't come, and his mind started wandering. He thought about many things, including his failed relationship with Camilla, the death of his grandma, and his recent change of nationality to become an Ivory Coast citizen. Many more thoughts raced through his mind, and he finally realized the meaning of true loneliness while pushing for greatness.

Sure, his football career had progressed at an unbelievable speed. The investments he had made were also promising. But aside from those two elements, he had not developed the other aspects of his life, the most miserable of those being his social acumen.

First and foremost, he was out of touch with most of his previous acquaintances, including his relatives, former teammates, and other people he knew during his younger years. He had also broken up with Camilla, and it was as if he couldn't maintain all his relationships long enough. He was alone in every true sense of the world, and the only good thing he had going for him was his football.

"After tomorrow's game," Zachary resolved, "I have to spare time and reach out to my former acquaintances like Kasongo, the Ottersons, Marta, Melissa, my former teammates, and my former coaches. I must constantly check up on them, but aside from that, I also have to continue working hard to progress my football career. Football is the greatest thing in my life, and I should endeavor to do my utmost not to lose it."

With the resolutions made, Zachary's mood lightened. He was no longer thinking of random things, and a few minutes later, he sank into the warm embrace of slumber and soon started dreaming about winning the Ballon d'Or.