

Greatest 541

Chapter 541 The Strategy is the Counterattack II

Juventus FC 2 (5) : Bayer 04 Leverkusen 0 (1)

"Mamma Mia! Oh, my goodness me!" Tiziano Caressa, the aged commentator, exclaimed as the Juventus players gathered around the corner flag to celebrate. "Juventus has caught the Bayer 04 Leverkusen defenders napping again. Through Alvaro Morata, they hit the German team on the counter and scored Juventus' 2nd goal for the night during the 16th minute. They have extended their aggregate lead to four goals and are, without a doubt, the team most likely to qualify for the UEFA Champions League quarter-finals. I can't picture how Bayer 04 Leverkusen can overcome such a deficit."

"Indeed," Fabio Crudeli, the other commentator, agreed. "Juventus has players of all types in their squad. They have midfielders with incredible passing ranges, like Andrea Pirlo, Zachary Bemba, and Claudio Marchisio. They also have abnormally-fast players, like Patrice Evra, Stephan Lichtsteiner, Carlos Tevez, and Zachary again. When they all combine, they are deadly on the attack. They have all the arsenal to effortlessly tear through the best defenses in Europe and score when they initiate a counterattack. If the Bayer 04 Leverkusen players don't stop committing more bodies forward, they will continue attracting such terrifying counters and even concede more goals before the final whistle sounds."

"That's true," Tiziano Caressa chimed in. "Once again, Zachary has been quite remarkable for Juventus. He has scored another Champions League goal to take his tally to 11. Additionally, Zachary was the most impressive during Juventus' second counterattack. He dribbled past three defenders before threading an assist that resulted in Alvaro Morata's second goal for Juventus. In my book, Zachary Bemba is the best player on the field tonight."

"Yes, the young ball wizard has been quite spectacular throughout the opening fifteen minutes," Fabio Crudeli, the other commentator, supplemented. "Every time he receives the ball, you can't help but feel that something incredible will happen. He is, without a doubt, a spectacular attacking midfielder, and he is likely to score more goals if the Bayer Leverkusen players don't formulate a plan to contain him."

The commentators were totally spot-on with their analysis. Bayer 04 Leverkusen failed to formulate a strategy to contain Zachary, thus sealing their fate in the Champions League Round of Sixteen fixture.

After a failed attack during the 28th minute, Zachary again caught the Bayer 04 Leverkusen players on the counter. He exchanged lightning-fast passes with Carlos Tevez and Stephan Lichtsteiner as they speared toward the opponent's half to advance the counterattack.

The ball naturally returned to Zachary as he stepped past the border of the final third. He collected it mid-stride and skipped past and dribbling skills, he cut through the pitch like a whirlwind while bearing down fast on Bayer 04 Leverkusen's goal. However, just as a Bayer 04 Leverkusen defender with skillful footwork while continuing to approach the box. Then, when the opposing keeper rushed out from between the posts to greet him, Zachary remained composed. He finished with a simple chip over the helpless keeper to score Juventus' 3rd goal for the night.

But that was not the end of Zachary's brilliance. Immediately after the second half started, he struck again on the counter. By relying on the same strategy of taking on opposing defenders with his pace and dribbling skills, he cut through the pitch like a whirlwind while bearing down fast on Bayer 04 Leverkusen's goal. However, just as he was about to drive past another defender and step into the box, he was unfortunately fouled and denied the chance to score his third goal for the night during the 47th minute.

Fortunately, the referee blew the whistle and offered Juventus a free-kick just outside Bayer 04 Leverkusen's eighteen-yard box. As usual, Zachary stepped forward and converted the set piece from twenty-two yards away to score Juventus' fourth goal for the night during the 49th minute. With that, he had also bagged another hat trick — a feat that allowed him to draw closer to his ultimate goals of winning the Golden Boot and becoming the MVP of the Champions League that season.

The game continued after the goal celebrations. But surprisingly, the Bayer 04 Leverkusen players, who happened to have conceded a fourth goal on the counter, didn't curb their desire to attack. Despite the game circumstances, they persistently stuck to their custom offensive playing style and continued committing bodies forward. And, of course, their stubbornness left them vulnerable to the Juventus attackers, who remained terrifying on the counterattack.

Everything that followed was only natural.

During the 56th minute, Juventus hit them hard again through Carlos Tevez, who linked up with a pinpoint pass from Andrea Pirlo to score Juventus' 5th goal for the night.

Twelve minutes later, during the 68th minute, Juventus tore through them again. A long ball from Andrea Pirlo found Patrice Evra, who exchanged quick one-twos with Zachary to cut through the middle and score Juventus' 6th goal on the counterattack.

Five minutes later, during the 73rd minute, the same story played out again. After a failed Bayer 04 Leverkusen corner kick, the Juventus players did what they had done all night and streamed forward to counterattack. Their snappy exchange of passes left Bayer 04 Leverkusen helpless, and they effortlessly arrived in the final third. It was then that ball naturally found its way to Zachary, and he remained composed and unleashed a shot from outside the box to score Juventus' 7th and final goal for the night.

During the 87th minute, the visitors scored for the first time that night. Bayer 04 Leverkusen successfully converted a corner kick and cut Juventus' lead to six goals. However, that was all they could manage, and the game ended when the score was still 7:1 in favor of Juventus.

Once again, Beatrice Piretti, the Sky Italia journalist, hosted the Champions League post-match show that evening. She smiled at the cameras and said, "Okay, that was one weird Champions League game. Can anyone help me understand what exactly happened to Bayer 04 Leverkusen?" She turned to look at the two pundits in the studio.

One of the pundits, who happened to be Roberto Baggio, smiled as the cameras focused on him. "What happened was simple. Bayer 04 Leverkusen tried to play an attacking game against a stronger Juventus side. They left themselves open at the back and attracted more and more counterattacks. That left them with no other possibility but to lose the game by a score of 7:1."

"All that I understand," Beatrice Piretti said while maintaining her smile. "But after conceding the first or second goal, why didn't they alter their game plan? Why didn't they play a defensive game instead of remaining adamant and continuing to play on the offensive against Juventus?"

"Well..." Roberto Baggio smiled. "They initially wanted to equalize the game, but their attack failed. That allowed Juventus to catch them on the counter and score the second goal. Bayer 04 Leverkusen, being

an attack-minded team, didn't give up, though. After settling down for a few minutes, they committed bodies forward again to launch another attack but failed. Juventus successfully hit them on the counter, and the cycle continued until Bayer 04 Leverkusen conceded all seven goals."

"Situations like these can happen during games if a team isn't careful," the pundit continued. "You concede a goal and attack, trying to equalize, but the opponent counters and scores the second. You try again and fail, but then the opponent continues scoring a second and possibly a third. Before you know it, you have already conceded four or five goals, and that takes all the morale out of you. You will then play the rest of the game without any drive, and in so doing, you will allow the opponent to score more goals. That might be what happened to Bayer 04 Leverkusen."

"I think Roberto is right," Alessandro Costacurta, the other pundit, said. "I have watched a few of Bayer 04 Leverkusen's games, and I can say with a hundred percent confidence that they are an excellent attack-minded team. Roger Schmidt, their coach, is a person who believes that attacking is the best defense in any game. Most times, he's able to utilize high-pressing tactics coupled with penetrating wing plays to apply pressure on the opponents and possibly score. He should have tried to put into play the same philosophy today. But with the presence of world-class attacking players like Zachary Bemba, Andrea Pirlo, Carlos Tevez, and Alvaro Morata on Juventus' squad, his strategy fell through. He could only watch helplessly from the sidelines as his team collapsed under Juventus' counterattacking strategy and conceded seven goals."

"Talking about Zachary," Beatrice Paretto chimed in, "He scored four more goals today and pushed his Champions League tally for this season to 14. He is only three goals away from equaling Cristiano Ronaldo's record of scoring seventeen times in a single Champions League season."

"Yes," Roberto Baggio agreed with a smile. "Cristiano Ronaldo's 2013-14 record of the most goals scored in a single Champions League season is under threat. Zachary still has to play two legs of the quarter-finals, then maybe two more legs of the semis before qualifying for the final. If Juventus remains in the tournament up to the finals, Zachary will definitely be among the players who continue scoring goals. I don't think he'll fail to find the back of the net three or four more times during those games. There's a high chance he'll set a new record by the end of this season."

"Slow down, Roberto!" Alessandro Costacurta, the other pundit, hurriedly interjected. "Juventus has a possibility of facing off against Real Madrid, Bayern Munich, or Barcelona in the Champions League quarter-finals. Do you think he can maintain his goal-scoring form against such teams?"

"Well..." Roberto Baggio replied. "Teams like Real Madrid and Barcelona are harder to score against. Sure, they will go the extra mile to defend while not forgetting to attack the opponents. But we're

talking about Zachary here. He has razor-sharp instincts while in the final third. He only needs a single opportunity, like a free-kick or a slight lapse in concentration on the opponent's side, and he will find the back of the net. As long as he remains fit, he'll continue bagging goals, no matter what teams he faces."

"The quarter-final draw for the Champions League will be held three days later, on Friday, March 20th, 2015," Beatrice Piretti, the host, stated as the cameras focused back on her. "Gentlemen! What are your predictions? Who do you think Juventus will face in the quarter-finals?"

"As I already said, the odds of them facing Real Madrid, Bayern Munich, or Barcelona are high," Alessandro Costacurta declared.

"I'm of a different view," Roberto Baggio said. "Juventus' luck this season has been not bad. I think they will face one of the weaker opponents, like FC Porto, Borussia Dortmund, and Paris Saint-Germain."

"I can see that you all have different predictions," Beatrice Piretti said with a chuckle. She then spent the next few minutes discussing the other Champions League Round of Sixteen fixtures before ending the show.

Chapter 542 A Call for International Duty

"DING"

A system notification resounded in Zachary's mind when he returned to his room later that night.

"The user has just scored more than a hat trick against Bayer 04 Leverkusen, which happens to be a top-four German Bundesliga team," the apathetic voice of the system AI followed. "As a result, the user has met the part-condition of the Giant-Killer Hatrick Challenge and acquired another skill shard of Ronaldinho's Step-Over and Feint Kingly Magic."

"The user has now obtained three out of the required twelve shards, meaning that he only has to collect nine more to meet the conditions needed to learn the skill."

"The user should continue working hard and score more hat tricks against the top-four teams of the best European Leagues, including the Italian Serie A, the English Premier League, the French League 1, the Spanish La Liga, and the German Bundesliga. That way, the user can quickly learn Ronaldinho's Step-Over and Feint Kingly Magic and push his game to another level."

Zachary's eyes lit up after hearing what the system AI had to say.

A few weeks ago, during the first leg of the Coppa Italia semi-finals, he had scored a hat trick against Fiorentina, which happened to be a top-four Italian Serie A team, and obtained a skill shard. Then, tonight, during the second leg of the Champions League Round of Sixteen, he bagged another four goals against Bayer 04 Leverkusen, a top-four German Bundesliga team, and obtained yet another shard. As such, he had now collected three of the twelve required skill fragments, and he was a step closer to learning Ronaldinho's Step-Over and Feint Kingly Magic.

Imagining all the glory he could get from learning the skill, Zachary's spirits soared. He wasn't satisfied with his current dribbling skills since they were still a level below those of once-in-a-generation dribblers like Diego Maradona, Lionel Messi, and Ronaldinho. He figured that if he could learn Ronaldinho's Step-Over and Feint Kingly Magic, he would gain all the tools to consummate his skills and form a never-before-seen potent dribbling style. Then, by utilizing his well-balanced and still evolving physical fitness attributes, he would bring out the best of the dribbling style and turn into a nightmare that every defender, no matter how skilled, would dread. Within two or three years, maybe all football fields would turn into his backyard, and he would achieve the greatness no football player had ever accomplished.

"The Champions League quarter-final draw is on Friday," Zachary mused as he settled on his bed. "I wonder what team we'll get for the quarter-finals."

The teams that had qualified for the Champions League quarter-finals included Real Madrid, FC Porto, Paris Saint-Germain, FC Bayern München, Monaco, and Juventus. If nothing too unexpected transpired, Barcelona and Borussia Dortmund would also win their games scheduled for the following day and qualify for the quarters.

Zachary understood that there was rarely a chance for any side to reach the quarters of a prestigious tournament like the Champions League without the matching skills and squad depth. As such, he had long readied himself to meet a strong opponent in the quarter-final. His confidence was boundless after experiencing the recent growth in his skills. No matter whether it was Real Madrid, Barcelona, or Bayern München, he would readily take them on in sooner rather than later in the Champions League.

"Time to go to bed."

the quarters, especially since it was better to challenge them sooner rather than later in the Champions League.

"Time to go to bed."

After playing ninety-plus minutes of intense Champions League football, Zachary's energy levels had long sunk below the norm. He didn't go through his pre-bedtime yoga routine but washed up quickly before entering between the sheets. A few minutes later, he slowly dozed off and eventually sunk into a peaceful and long slumber.

The sound of his phone ringing woke him up the following day. Opening his eyes slightly, he immediately realized it was already late in the morning. The sunlight streaming golden through a gap in the curtains illuminated his sleepy face. He raised his hand and shielded his eyes from the assault before extending his hand to pick up the still-ringing phone from the bedside table.

"Hello," he spoke into the phone after pressing the accept button.

"Bonjour, Zachary!" A familiar voice greeted him in French from the other side of the line. "I'm Omar Sangare. We previously talked on the phone."

"Sangare!" Zachary said while pushing himself from the bed into a seating position. "It has been long since we last communicated."

"Yes, it has been a long time. We last talked before the AFCON started. It has been more than two months since then."

"Yes, that's true," Zachary replied. "Congratulations upon winning the AFCON, by the way. The Ivory Coast team was impressive throughout the tournament." As he had expected, Ivory Coast performed well during the 2015 African Cup of Nations tournament. They defeated all opponents and finally emerged Champions after beating Ghana in the finals.

"Thank you, Zachary!" Omar Sangare said from the other end of the line. "We won. But it was tough. Had you been part of our squad, maybe it would have been easier for us to beat Ghana in the finals."

"That may not be the case," Zachary said. "Let's put the past aside. The reason for your call should be to tell me good news. Is that right?"

"That's exactly so," Omar Sangare said. "We have processed everything concerning your citizenship switch and submitted all the required paperwork to CAF and FIFA. You are now officially a citizen of the Ivory Coast and can play for us during the upcoming matches."

"Finally, that's good news," Zachary exclaimed. He had hoped that the Ivory Coast officials would process all his change of nationality paperwork by the end of January. But they had gone up to the end of March before finishing everything. At long last, his patience had paid off, and he could finally play international matches under the banner of the Ivory Coast team.

"Within the next two or three days," Omar Sangare stated, "Someone from our embassy in Italy will deliver the relevant paperwork, including your passport and identity card, to your residence in Turin. Feel free to use them during your upcoming travels."

"Thanks," Zachary said. "Are there any upcoming matches for Ivory Coast? And if there are, will I be part of the Ivory Coast team for those matches?"

"Yes, to all questions," Omar Sangare replied. "There are international friendlies coming up within the next two weeks or so. First, we'll play Angola on Thursday, March 26th, 2015. Then, three days later, on Sunday, March 29th, we'll battle Equatorial Guinea in another friendly. Both matches will be played at home in Abidjan, Ivory Coast. Our coach, Hervé Renard, has entrusted me with inviting you to the national team for both matches. Will you manage to come?"

"Of course, I'll travel and be there before the games," Zachary readily answered. He had long crammed the football calendar. He was sure there was a two-week international break after Juventus' upcoming Serie A game against Genoa. As such, nothing would prevent him from traveling to Ivory Coast and joining his new teammates for the friendlies.

Moreover, he understood that he would never get a second chance to make a fine first impression on his teammates. He didn't wish to appear as an arrogant and prideful player who would, without a

second thought, dismiss a call from the national team he'd chosen to represent. Instead, Zachary wanted to portray to his new teammates that he was a down-to-earth team player who would become a dedicated comrade during their endeavors to achieve football glory. Following that reasoning, there was no chance he would ignore his first call on the Ivory Coast team, despite knowing he would only get to play in two almost-pointless friendly games.

"I'm glad you chose to join us for the friendlies," Omar Sangare said excitedly. "When do you wish to travel?"

Zachary thought before saying, "My club has a Serie A game against Genoa on Sunday, March 22nd. I can only travel after that. Let's go with Monday, March 23rd. I can take a night flight from Turin on the 23rd and arrive in Ivory Coast the next day."

"Excellent," Omar Sangare exclaimed. "Arriving in Ivory Coast on the 24th will allow you two days of rest before the game against Angola. We'll even get time to conduct a press conference and introduce you to the local fans. It's truly a good plan."

"I'm glad you like the plan. If there's nothing else, I'll be hanging up." Zachary had just looked at the clock and realized that the time was already approaching ten in the morning. He wanted to end the call quickly and start on his other duties for the day.

"Just a moment," Omar Sangare hurriedly said. "Don't spend your money buying a plane ticket. I will e-mail you a first-class night plane ticket from Turin to Abidjan within the next two days. Are there any airlines you prefer?"

"Air France and Royal Air Maroc," Zachary replied. "The two airlines should both have flights from Turin to Abidjan. You can go with any of the two."

"Excellent," Omar Sangare said. "That's all the information I needed. Have a good day, and see you in Abidjan on the 24th."

"Thanks for calling, and see you then. I have to go now. Bye."

Zachary quickly ended the call. He then jumped out of bed and washed his face before starting his morning yoga routine. He was eager to overcome his post-match fatigue and regain a hundred percent match fitness before Juventus' upcoming Serie A home game against Genoa.

Chapter 543 Coach Allegri's Advice

As promised, Zachary received both his Ivorian passport and first-class air ticket to Abidjan within the next two days. He also met an official from the Ivory Coast Embassy in Italy, who explained issues concerning his citizenship switch to him.

The Ivorian Embassy official mentioned that Zachary would be entitled to several benefits, including match bonuses and travel allowances, among other perks, while playing for the Ivorian National Football team. As a true-blue Ivory Coast citizen, Zachary could also enjoy all the privileges that all Ivorians were entitled to. Whether it was buying land in Ivory Coast or voting, he could enjoy all those rights whenever he wished. And as a surprise, the official mentioned something about the Ivorian government offering Zachary some tax cuts and tax holidays if he ever decided to settle down in Ivory Coast and start businesses there.

The Ivorians were sure trying to make Zachary feel welcome on the Côte d'Ivoire National Football team. But, of course, there was a catch. He had to first represent their country well during international football competitions like the World Cup before he could enjoy the most rewarding benefits. There was no way around that.

After ending the meeting with the Ivorian Embassy official, Zachary readily returned his focus to training. He joined his teammates at the Vinovo, and together, they spent the next few days refining tactics and sharpening the game plan for their upcoming home Serie A game against Genoa.

As they trained, the hours turned into days, and the eve of the game arrived much quicker than they had expected. They ended their training early, at around 3:00 PM on that Saturday. They washed up and rested for about an hour before heading to the tactical room to attend Coach Max Allegri's pre-match strategy meeting.

Like always, Coach Max Allegri didn't spend much time explaining the tactics that day. He only highlighted a few main points of the game plan to ensure that his players were in the right mindset before the game. After that, he read out the line-up that included his most skilled players like Patrice Evra, Chiellini, Bonucci, Lichtsteiner, Vidal, Marchisio, Zachary, Andrea Pirlo, and Carlos Tevez. Then

finally, after assigning individual roles, he faced the crowd and started talking about the significance of the game against Genoa with a solemn tone.

"Lads!" The coach said, sweeping his gaze across his players. "We're only two and a half wins away from winning the Serie A title. We're just a step away from making history and winning the Italian League with eight matches remaining before the end of the season. We could be champions as early as Saturday, April 11th, 2015, if we could attain two victories and a draw in our next three games. What we have to do to achieve our hopes seems simple on paper. But if we falter and lose focus at this crucial moment, everything we've worked for all season might blow up in smoke. In the worst case, our fall from grace would start with losing a single game, and our momentum would falter. We would then struggle in the matches that follow, and the cycle would go on — until the very point when the trophy we were sure to win escapes our grasp."

"Guys!" Coach Max Allegri continued. "I know that it's hard to imagine us faltering and losing our overwhelming 27-point lead. I know that it's hard to visualize our team losing nine of the remaining eleven Serie A games and squandering our chance to win another title. But guys, as professionals, we should all know that anything can happen this late in the season."

"Some teams are struggling to avoid relegation, others are fighting to gain a spot to play Champions League and Europa League football, and the remaining few wish to end their season well with a good position on the Serie A table. All those teams will be tough opponents when we chance upon them, especially since they will be willing to do everything possible to go home with a point or three after a game. They will ensure that we sweat and struggle hard to score any goal while out there on the pitch."

"How do we overcome them? Simple! We remain focused! We remain hardworking! We remain motivated! We prepare and play each of our next three games as if they are all finals. We do what we have been doing all seasons and play with the sole intent of winning. That's how we remain ahead of everybody else and win the Serie A title. That's how we become Champions! Do you guys feel me? Are you with me?"

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

"Are you with me?" The coach asked again in an even louder voice.

"Yes, coach! We're with you." The players roared back to match their coach's enthusiasm. They all seemed quite motivated after listening to their coach's little speech.

"Nice!" Coach Max Allegri inhaled deeply and narrowed his eyes. "Everything starts tomorrow. Our quest to become champions in the shortest time possible will begin when we face Genoa at 3:00 PM tomorrow. What are we to do? Simple! We play as usual and We overwhelm them and thrash them so hard — and in so doing, we build up more momentum for the upcoming games. That is all render our opponents powerless in the face of our individual brilliance and formidable teamwork. We play with enough drive and work hard from the first minute of the game so that our opponents will find it almost unimaginable to get even a draw from the match. We overwhelm them and thrash them so hard — and in so doing, we build up more momentum for the upcoming games. That is all we have to do, and we'll still be on the right course to win the Serie A title within the next three games..."

The coach spent fifteen more minutes voicing out encouraging words to his players. Then, after ensuring that his message had hit home, he said his goodbyes to his players and sent them back to their homes for the night.

After the tactics meeting ended, Zachary hurriedly stood up and followed the two coaches - Max Allegri and Maurizio Trombetta. He caught up with the coaches as they turned into the hallway heading to the offices and then wasted no time requesting a small discussion with them.

The coaches had no reason to deny his request. They readily invited him to Coach Max Allegri's office and offered him a seat.

"So, Zachary!" Coach Allegri exchanged a glance with his assistant and spoke first. "What is this about? Why do you wish to meet us on the eve of an important game? Is there a problem?"

"Coach!" Zachary spoke in his somewhat strained Italian. "I'm not facing any challenges at the moment. But I just wanted to inform you that I will travel away from Turin to represent my country during the international break."

Coach Max Allegri wrinkled his brows. "So, the rumors are true. You'll represent Côte d'Ivoire."

"Yes, that's true," Zachary replied. "I'll play for Côte d'Ivoire during the upcoming international friendlies."

Coach Max Allegri nodded. "When do you wish to travel? And when will you be returning?"

"I will take a night flight from Turin to Abidjan the day after tomorrow. Then, if everything proceeds according to plan, I should return to Turin eight days later, on Wednesday, April 1st, 2015. That will be three days before our game against Empoli."

"Oh!" Coach Max Allegri narrowed his eyes and glanced at the calendar on his table. He then turned his gaze back to Zachary and asked, "Can't you return earlier? Just remember that we're at a sensitive point of the season. All teams we face will go all out to stop us from winning the trophy this early in the season. We need all our crucial players, including you, to train adequately for the games."

"Coach!" Zachary said. "I understand all that. But still, it will be impossible for me to return to Turin before April 1st. Ivory Coast's game against Equatorial Guinea is on Sunday, March 29th. After the game, I'll have to rest on the 30th before taking an evening flight from Abidjan to Turin on the 31st. Coach! As you can see, I have already cut my schedule short in order to return to Turin and join the preparations for our game against Empoli as soon as possible. I can't cut it any further."

Coach Allegri's brows remained creased. He inhaled deeply again and said, "Okay! I understand, Zachary. You're, of course, free to go and represent your country. But please take care of yourself while out there. Protect yourself from injuries during matches, and avoid overstraining yourself. As you already said, you'll be playing international friendlies. So, there's no point pushing yourself hard and hurting yourself at this crucial point of the season. Understood?"

"I understand, coach!" Zachary said. "I will do my best to protect myself while out there. More than anything, I also wish to continue performing well both in the Serie A and Champions League."

"Good!" Coach Allegri smiled for the first time. "I'm glad you understand. After here, you can email human resources about the issue. I'll give the go-ahead, and they will readily accept your request to travel to Ivory Coast on Monday."

"Thanks for your consideration, coach," Zachary said with a smile.

"No need for thanks." Coach Allegri's smile brightened. He then talked with Zachary about other issues, including his training challenges and personal life. Then, about thirty minutes later, they ended their conversation on a positive note and went their own ways.

Chapter 544 The Shocking Opening Minutes

Sunday, March 22nd, 2015

Juventus Stadium, Turin, Italy.

Time: 3:00 PM

FWEEEEEEEE

The referee blew the whistle on time, and the much-anticipated Serie A battle between Juventus and Genoa commenced. The first few minutes were full of midfield battles as both teams fought hard to gain dominance on the field of play. But eventually, after about twelve minutes of intense football, Juventus came out on top by relying on their star-studded midfield, which included world-class players like Andrea Pirlo, Arturo Vidal, and Zachary Bemba. The team from Turin effortlessly settled into the game and started dictating the tempo. From there on, Juventus' attacks grew increasingly more threatening, and it wasn't long before the men in striped black and white jerseys created their first goal-scoring chance.

"Whoosh..."

Zachary, who had already gotten used to his unrestrained role on the Juventus squad, floated into the left wing during the 14th minute. He connected with a raking long ball from Andrea Pirlo and then initiated a two-versus-one battle against Facundo Roncaglia, one of the three Genoa defenders. By working with Patrice Evra, the two of them effortlessly beat the Genoa defender, and before long, they started cutting back into the pitch towards Genoa's goal.

"Zachary! Zachary..."

The cheers around the stadium hit a thunderous peak as Patrice Evra received the ball and quickly threaded it back to Zachary to complete another lightning-fast exchange of one-tuos.

Zachary controlled the ball well without losing composure and squared it toward Carlos Tevez, who happened to have just dashed into an unmarked pocket of space at the edge of Genoa's box.

Carlos Tevez, on his part, was quite unselfish at that juncture. He took only a single deft touch to escape from his marker. Then, when the angle opened up, the Argentine unleashed a diagonal pass through the legs of the defender and into the path of Zachary, who happened to have continued his brazen sprinting toward the opponent's goal.

With that rapid exchange of passes between Zachary and Tevez, the Genoa center-backs were thoroughly beaten. Their expressions appeared contorted as they instinctively turned around to stare at Zachary, who happened to be already driving into the box like a lightning bolt. But despite their unwillingness to surrender, there was not a thing they could do at that moment to stop him. Like statues, they remained rooted in place as the cheers rose up a notch in anticipation of Juventus' first goal on the night.

"Pa..."

Zachary slowed down and took another touch as he approached the keeper from a tight angle. Everything before him seemed to slow down at that moment, and he drew his leg back before unleashing a shot toward the goal. His intent was to curl the ball past the keeper and then effortlessly find the inside of the far post before the Genoa defenders could recover.

However, to Zachary's surprise, Mattia Perin, the Genoa goalkeeper, reacted abnormally. The keeper, who had already initiated a diving motion to the right, suddenly altered his center of gravity to realign his posture and spring to the left. Moreover, Mattia Perin's reflexes were lightning-fast, and he managed to graze the ball with his fingertips, thus altering the shot's trajectory by a slight margin.

"Shit..."

Zachary couldn't help but mutter a curse when he saw the goalkeeper's fingertips skimming the ball. He had gone for accuracy, intending to find the far corner, just inside the far post, as he released the ball. As such, he was already dreading the fact that the slight graze from the keeper would send the ball away from its intended target, and then he would be in for a world of disappointment.

"BAM!"

As expected, Zachary's curling shot didn't find the inside of the far post. The ball instead smashed off the post before rebounding into the box. Fortunately, Juventus' chance wasn't over as Carlos Tevez was the first to pounce toward the just-rebounded ball. The Argentine reached it before all the opponents and unleashed a first-time snapshot toward the middle of the goal. Moreover, he had taken the shot with power and thus effortlessly beat the Genoa keeper, who was still trying to pick himself up from the ground after saving Zachary's effort.

"This is it..."

Zachary, who happened to be watching from the side, felt his hopes soar as the ball dashed past the keeper while heading fast toward the back of the net. But the next second, his spirits sank into the abyss of boundless gloom as a silhouette donning Genoa's red and dark blue jersey appeared out of the blue to intercept the shot. The Genoa man moved like a ghost, and before Zachary could blink, the ball was already being cleared away from the goal line.

"What the hell..."

Feelings of surprise and dismay assaulted Zachary's psyche as he watched the just-cleared ball soar high toward the night skies of Turin before floating out of play. Zachary had tried his best to chip the ball past the keeper and score Juventus' 1st goal during the 15th minute but failed. Seconds later, Carlos Tevez also tried on the rebound but still failed. Moreover, there was also that Genoa defender who appeared out of nowhere to clear away Tevez's effort from the goal line. The entire series of events replayed through Zachary's mind, and he could contain his anguish. He was even more disappointed with himself for missing the chance after taking in the dejected expressions of the Juventus supporters in the stands behind the goal.

"Don't mind, don't mind!" A familiar voice sounded beside Zachary as the negative feelings threatened to overwhelm him. "We have missed these two chances. That's a fact. But let's get over them quickly and create more opportunities. As long as we keep on testing their defense and keeper, we'll, at one point, score a goal."

Zachary inclined his head and realized that the player trying to console him was Fernando Llorente, Juventus' second-striker for the day. Smiling slightly, Zachary said, "Thanks, Fernando. I understand what we have to do. Let's continue creating more opportunities. I don't believe the Genoa defenders will continue being lucky if we create more chances on goal. We'll surely score and win the game."

"That's the spirit." Fernando Llorente smiled and patted Zachary's back. "We try once, and if we fail, we try the second, then the third, and countless more times until we finally score. That's all we have to do until we score."

Zachary nodded and headed back toward his position in midfield. The cleared ball had moved out of play for a throw-in on the left flank. So, he readily sprinted into an unmarked space close to the left of the midfield and shouted for the ball.

FWEEEEEEEE

The referee blew the whistle a second or so later. Patrice Evra, the Juventus left-back, immediately raced towards the line and threw the ball into the pitch. The Frenchman's accuracy was spot on, and he effortlessly found Zachary, who was still lurking in the unmarked pocket of space close to the border of the final third on the left flank.

"Whoosh..."

Zachary took off like the wind and connected with the throw-in ball from Patrice Evra. His SS-grade skills worked like a charm, and he brought the ball under control on the first try.

But right at that moment, his instincts tingled. With a slight incline of his head, he spotted a Genoa player approaching his position like a speeding train.

Zachary held his breath and let his instincts take over. He controlled the ball with his right boot while using his body to shield it from the fast-approaching defender. The next second, the Marseille Turn Juju worked wonders — and just like a true-blue incarnation of the great Zinedine Zidane, he smoothly completed a 360-degree turn before accelerating quickly past the defender.

Control the ball! Marseille Turn! Instant acceleration!

Zachary completed the entire series of movements swiftly and gracefully, like a skilled dancer performing an elegant dance with the ball. Before the helpless defender could realize what was happening, Zachary was already dashing past another opponent while approaching Genoa's box like a raging tempest.

A few seconds later, Zachary floated into the space before the box and faced off against Nicolás Burdisso, Genoa's captain and center-back. Zachary didn't choose to take the defender on with his dribbling skills. Instead, he skillfully threaded a diagonal ball past the defender to set up a one-versus-one battle between Fernando Llorente and the Genoa keeper. Moreover, Zachary's timing was spot on, and he released the ball a second before Fernando Llorente could run into an offside position.

At that moment, the cheers around the Juventus stadium hit a thunderous crescendo. Fernando Llorente was, of course, not bothered by the loud noise in the stadium. He connected with Zachary's pin-point through pass on the left side of the box and drove it forward like the wind. Then, before the Genoa defenders could react, he dug his boot under the ball and dinked it over the keeper with the grace and composure that matched his skills as a world-class finisher.

Right after that, Fernando Llorente slowly started raising his hands, seemingly to celebrate. But then, the next moment, his expression turned aghast as something he had not expected transpired. And just by reflex, he placed his already raised hands to the back of his head as the ball smashed off the crossbar and bounced back into the space just before the goal line.

"The chance is still on," Zachary yelled to remind the stunned Fernando Llorente. "Hurry and go after the ball..."

Fernando Llorente, being a sharp striker of the world-class level, didn't need any reminders on what to do in such a situation. He reacted like a mighty lion going in for the kill and dived head-first toward the still-bouncing ball.

Right at that moment, when Fernando's head was 'just about' to make contact with the ball, the time seemed to slow down, and a gloved hand appeared out of nowhere. It was, of course, Mattia Perin, Genoa's goalkeeper, in action. The shot-stopper's acrobatics were almost inhuman as he palmed the ball away from Fernando's head at the last instant to save the situation.

FWEEEEEEEE

The referee immediately blew the whistle and pointed to the corner flag after the ball bounced beyond the touchline for a corner kick. But all the Juventus players, including Zachary, seemed oblivious to the referee's actions. Their shocked and dismayed expressions said it all. It was as if they were still stuck in a

past moment, and they couldn't believe they had missed yet another clear chance to take the lead during the 17th minute.

Chapter 545 Deadlock

The referee's whistle sounded again, and the Juventus players went into action. Andrea Pirlo smashed the ball from the corner spot and sent it on a curling trajectory toward Genoa's already chaotic box.

Within the area, the players of both teams had long started a messy battle of pulling, grabbing, and shoving each other. As the corner ball descended toward the box, there seemed to be the smell of gunpowder around the area. The scramble was a fight for aerial superiority blown out of proportion. As such, the eyes of all the competing players glittered with indomitable fighting spirit as they all struggled to outwit their opponents and meet the corner ball.

"Whoosh..."

Leonardo Bonucci, the Juventus center-back, was the first to overpower an opponent and leap off the ground to meet the corner ball. But under the entanglement of another opponent, his head missed the ball by mere inches, and he could only dejectedly watch it continue toward the direction of the far post.

"Whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh..."

A second later, players of both teams continued towering high into the air to connect with the ball. But their attempts were all futile, and the ball flashed barely above their heads as it continued on its teasing trajectory toward the area beyond the far post.

The next instant, right as the ball was about to float out of play, a silhouette finally connected with it. It was Carlos Tevez, who had long camped in the area just beyond the far post. The center-forward reacted like a Ninja and contorted his physique to throw himself at the ball. He headed it back toward the middle of the box before it could head out of play.

Another chaotic scuffle followed as the players of both teams pounced after the returning ball like hungry hyenas going after a helpless rabbit. But eventually, it was Arturo Vidal, the Juventus midfielder, who came out on top to send the ball past an opponent and toward the goal with a raised boot. His luck seemed to smash through the heavens, and by some miracle, his attempt flashed through the spaces 'in between' a hoard of players before finding the back of the net.

"GOAAAL.."

Being his usual eccentric self, Arturo Vidal immediately roared like a madman and started racing toward the corner flag to celebrate the goal. But right after taking a few strides, he seemed to realize that something was off about the situation and stopped dead in his tracks.

The next moment, he reflexively glanced toward the referee and noticed that the man was already pointing his arm toward Juventus' side of the pitch. Everything was then clear to Vidal. The referee had already blown the whistle to cancel the goal and then offered a free-kick to Genoa.

"Motherfuc..."

Arturo Vidal used every ounce of his willpower to stop himself from going berserk as he raced toward the referee. His acceleration was impressive, and he was in the referee's face within no time.

"Ref!" He said with narrowed eyes akin to a predator eyeing its prey. "What did I do wrong? I went for a fair ball and tapped it into the back of the net without touching an opponent! So, tell me why you canceled our goal and offered the opponents a free kick. Are you kidding me?"

"Raised boot!" The referee said lightly and stepped away from Vidal. "The goal will not stand as your actions lacked unprofessionalism. You were just inches from kicking Facundo Roncaglia in the head with your boot studs. Had he not stepped back to avoid your lunge, he would now be lying on the ground with a head injury. So, Vidal! Tell me why I should allow a goal scored in such a manner to stand?"

Vidal was incensed after hearing the referee's explanation. "Football is a man's game," he said. "How can you cancel a goal simply because a defender playing in the Italian Serie A, which happens to be one of the top football leagues in the world, was scared to make contact with the ball? Your actions don't make any sense!"

The referee smiled and said, "I have already given my explanation. The goal will not stand. Step away and let the opponents take the free-kick."

"But..." Arturo Vidal was about to continue arguing. But right then, the other Juventus players, including Andrea Pirlo, Carlos Tevez, and Patrice Evra, swooped in. They pulled the anguished Chilean midfielder away and stopped him from further angering the referee.

Of course, the other Juventus players were also unsatisfied with the referee's decision. But they remained disciplined and handled the situation calmly to prevent the worst-case scenario from happening. They wanted to ensure Vidal wouldn't get a pointless red card that early in the game.

FWEEEEEEE

A minute later, after the situation on the pitch calmed down, the referee blew the whistle. The game restarted with a Genoa free-kick. But after only a dozen or so seconds, the Genoa players lost possession, and the Juventus players took advantage of the opportunity to continue dictating the game's tempo.

The Juventus players were sure on fire. They continued arraying themselves in their 3-4-1-2 formation while launching attack after attack against Genoa's defense. They played splendid football throughout the rest of the first half and came close to scoring on numerous occasions. But again and again, their efforts always fell short when they reached the final third, and they couldn't find the back of the net. As such, the score remained deadlocked at 0:0 as the players matched down the tunnel for the half-time break.

After the fifteen-minute break, the game resumed with a bang. The Juventus players, who had just listened to Coach Max Allegri's pep talk, continued playing like they were on steroids. From the very 1st minute of the second half, they started dominating proceedings with their neat midfield play while sometimes attacking from the wings to mount pressure on Genoa's defense.

Everything that followed was only natural. The Genoa players couldn't match Juventus' individual brilliance and teamwork. As such, the players in red and blue jerseys fell back into their own side of the pitch to defend. Their strategy was straightforward. They arrayed themselves into a bizarre 3-6-1 formation, with all bodies back in their own half to 'park the bus' and weather Juventus' increasingly terrifying attacks.

Chapter 546 Light at the End of a Tunnel

The 'parking the bus' defensive tactic seemed to work wonders for the Genoa players. It allowed them to compensate for their lack of skills with their hard work while toiling like true warriors to prevent

Juventus from breaking through their ranks. As such, they kept the game deadlocked at a score of 0:0 as the match approached the late stages.

Of course, there were times the efforts of the Genoa players couldn't stop the inevitable, and the highly tactical Juventus players would break through them. But during such tense moments, Mattia Perin, the Genoa keeper who had been in fine form from the first minute, would rise to the occasion. The miracle worker of a shot-stopper would perform beyond all expectations and save whatever was unleashed at him by the Juventus players. He was a true-blue world-class goalkeeper, at least for that specific day.

For instance, Zachary dribbled past a few Genoa midfielders during the 73rd minute and then unleashed a thunderous shot toward the goal from the edge of the box. But Mattia Perin reacted like an incarnation of a gladiator and punched the ball out of play to save the situation.

Six minutes later, during the 79th minute, Juventus again tried to find the back of the net through Carlos Tevez. The striker turned and twisted to step into the box before unleashing a grounded carpet shot toward the inside of the far post. But once again, the nemesis of Juventus, that was Mattia Perin, made another incredible save and pushed the ball out of play for a corner kick.

During the last few minutes of the game, the Juventus players continued attacking and asking all the important questions on the field of play. Be it long-range shots, one-twos to break into the box, and corner kicks — the Old Lady threw everything they had at the Genoa defense. Their seemingly never-ending attacks caused stress, tension, and anxiety to descend upon the Juventus stadium. And as the game proceeded into injury time, they even shifted into a higher gear and caused all fans and pundits watching the game to hold their breaths.

Juventus' highly skilled players were like demons constantly haunting the Genoa players during the last four minutes of added time. They switched to a Tiki-taka playing style that featured snappy exchanges of passes. Eventually, they linked up well like bona fide ball grandmasters and broke through Genoa's ranks during the 94th minute when only a few seconds remained to the final whistle.

At that crucial moment, the ball naturally returned to Zachary's feet. He turned and twisted close to the edge of the box before drawing his leg back with the intention to unleash a hell of a shot goalward. The only thought in his mind was to find the top right corner and score a winning goal for Juventus before the referee could blow the final whistle.

But just then, before Zachary could swing his leg down, something he had not expected transpired. He felt a strong tug on his shirt, and before he could understand what was happening, he found himself tumbling down on the ground with a thud.

"Foul!"

"Free kick!"

The entire stadium erupted into shouts of fouls and free-kicks the next moment. The yells were deafening as all the Juventus fans, players, and coaches joined together to demand justice for Zachary.

The referee, who had been in a strategic position to observe the foul, didn't need any reminders. He stepped forward and showed a yellow card to Nicolás Burdisso, the center-back who had committed a foul by pulling Zachary back. After that, the referee also pointed to the scene of the fouling incident and offered Juventus a free-kick just a few yards from the box.

"Yeahhhh!"

The stadium erupted into thunderous applause after the referee made the decision. The Juventus fans all started jubilating as they had finally gotten one final chance to score and take the lead before the game could end.

Meanwhile, the Juventus players didn't lose themselves in the excitement. Instead, they remained calm and held a short meeting to prepare for the free kick.

"This is our last chance!" Andrea Pirlo said to Zachary while holding out the ball to him. "Are you confident?"

"Andrea, please!" Patrice Evra hurriedly chimed in before Zachary could respond. "Stop putting the guy under pressure. Let him do as usual and take the free kick. If he scores, he scores. If he doesn't, that's also acceptable. We'll only have to do our best during our upcoming games and compensate for the draw."

Andrea Pirlo narrowed his eyes and glanced at the seemingly lackluster Evra. But being a calm person by nature, the Maestro didn't try to say anything else. He shook his head and handed the ball to Zachary before stepping away.

Zachary, on his part, also shook his head and placed the ball on the free-kick spot. He then raised his head briefly to assess the situation within Genoa's box while also taking a few steps back from the ball.

After having a full grasp of everything, Zachary didn't continue observing. He instead closed his eyes and shut out all the noise. Slowly but steadily, he forgot everything else and entered a bizarre calm state while waiting for the referee to blow the whistle.

FWEEEEEEE

The referee's whistle sounded after about half a minute.

Zachary's eyes opened like two flashlight beams, and he took only an instant to observe everything before him. Whatever he saw was in high definition as the Dead-Ball Specialist Juju had already pushed his spatial awareness and risk analysis core attributes to the SSS grading. He took an angled run toward the ball before skillfully drawing his leg back to take the set piece.

"BAM!"

His ears picked up the sound of the boot smashing against synthetic rubber. He followed through with his swinging action and sent the ball goalward. His motions were textbook perfect, and he mixed both power and accuracy to send a shot above Genoa's defensive wall.

SILENCE!

A numbing silence immediately descended upon the stadium as the curling shot from Zachary soared over the wall like a surface-to-surface missile. All those watching the game held their breaths as they followed the ball's trajectory.

The Juventus faithful were obviously praying for the ball to find its way into the back of the net. On the other hand, the Genoa supporters, coaches, and players alike were without a doubt glaring at the ball while visualizing words like, "Please, let it be a Miss!" and "Please don't go into the back of the net!"

Of course, the Genoa faithful envisioned all those nasty phrases and bad luck words with red eyes, and if they could, they would readily reach out to a shaman to curse the ball at that moment. But alas, there was nothing they could do as everything happened almost in an instant.

The ball made a perfect parabola over the wall, and before anyone could blink, it started descending toward the goal. The on-form Genoa keeper reacted as he should and executed an acrobatic dive to save the situation. But alas, his actions were a tad bit too late, and the ball flashed a few inches beyond his outstretched fingertips before grazing off the post and homing into the back of the net. And with that, Zachary had saved the day and converted a last-minute free kick to give Juventus the lead during the 97th minute of gameplay.

Chapter 547 The Awestruck Commentators

Juventus FC 1 : Genoa CFC 0

The loud yells and maddening cheers of the Juventus fans shook the stadium to its core after Zachary converted a free-kick to score the 1st goal of the evening. The situation within the stands also turned messy as the supporters of all age groups jumped, danced, sang, and jubilated like a bunch of kids that had just chanced upon Santa Claus on Christmas Eve.

During the chaos, some of the supporters even tried to jump over the barricades and rush into the pitch to celebrate. But fortunately, the meticulous stadium security did a remarkable job and stopped the frenzied fans from following through with their intended actions.

In the meantime, the Juventus players had also gathered around the corner flag to celebrate the goal. They jubilated like there was no tomorrow in front of their fans for minutes without minding about anything else. A madness of excitement had long overwhelmed them after Zachary bagged the winner very late in the game.

The referee, on his part, didn't hurry the Juventus players to end their celebrations as the added minutes of injury time had already elapsed. He blew the final whistle and brought the proceedings to a

close, thus sending the already jubilating Juventus fans, players, and coaches into more frenzy. More chaos and cheers ensued after that, and the situation in the stadium didn't calm down until after about half an hour.

"Well, well, well..." Fabio Crudeli, the commentator for the day, exclaimed when the cheers started dying down. "Zachary has done it again. He did what he does best and converted a free kick to score Juventus' 1st goal for the evening very late during injury time. When we were all beginning to believe Juventus would drop points today, Zachary Bemba rose to the occasion and won the game with barely any seconds remaining on the clock. He is definitely a ball wizard that makes things happen, and he has just given Juventus the most extraordinary ending to the match."

"I don't care about what anyone else says," Tiziano Caressa, the other commentator, said. "I also don't care about the score. But in my book, this is the most extraordinary match ending the Italian Serie A has had all season. Right from the first minute, the Juventus players threw everything they had at Genoa. But Genoa was a tough nut to crack, and the men in blue and red held their own against the Italian giants. The visitors played with character and drive and kept the score deadlocked at a score of 0:0 until the very last minute. They were only seconds away from going home with a point, but then they committed a foul in front of the box to gift Zachary the perfect chance to go for glory. Had they not committed the foul, maybe we would have had a different ending, and Genoa would have gone home with a point today."

"I wonder what went through Nicolás Burdisso's mind before he committed the foul," Fabio Crudeli said. "All of us understand that conceding a free-kick within the final third against Juventus is like conceding a penalty against any other Serie A team! Due to Zachary's presence, Juventus always has an abnormally high probability of scoring from a set piece rather than from open play. The Genoa coaches should have warned Nicolás Burdisso about all this before the game. So, why did he commit a foul on Zachary only a few yards from the box? What was he thinking?"

Tiziano Caressa chuckled. "My friend, you're forgetting one thing. When you're a defender, the only instinct that rules your mind is stopping the opponent from moving forward. You might tell yourself not to commit a foul thousands of times before stepping on the pitch. But at the crucial moment, when a forward is just about to leave you in the dust and attack your goal, your instincts will take over. You'll reflexively try to tackle the ball, and if you can't, you'll go for a foul and take one for the team."

"This is just what happened to Genoa's center-back - Nicolás Burdisso," the commentator continued. "He didn't wish to foul Zachary. But when he noticed that the boy wizard was about to pull the trigger, he reacted instinctively and pulled him back."

"Let's also not forget that the Genoa players were already spent at that point in the game. They were tired. They were only keeping Juventus at bay by relying on their drive. But as we all know, sheer will and fighting spirit can only take you so far during an intensive football game, especially on the professional stage. When you're playing against highly skilled opponents, and fatigue sets in, then your fighting spirit won't help. Your reactions will slow down, and the only thing you can do to stop your opponent at a crucial moment is to foul."

"Nicolás Burdisso had been defending tenaciously for 90-plus minutes against highly tactical and agile players like Zachary, Carlos Tevez, and Andrea Pirlo. He was already fatigued during the 94th minute, and the only thing he could do to stop Zachary was to pull him back before he could pull the trigger. Of course, the other option was to ignore the dire situation and let Zachary shoot. But we don't know whether Zachary would have found the target and beaten the keeper to score."

"Talking about the keepers," Fabio Crudeli said, "Gianluigi Buffon, the Juventus keeper, had a relaxed evening. If I remember correctly, the Genoa players only tasted him twice or thrice, and all occasions were during corner kicks. On the other hand, Mattia Perin, the Genoa keeper, had a busy evening. He made a whooping sixteen saves, nine of which were from inside the box. The Juventus players, including Zachary, Tevez, Fernando Llorente, and Pirlo, tested him countless times. But time after time, he continued coming out on top and kept the score deadlocked at 0:0 until the very last second when he conceded that unfortunate free-kick."

"His goalkeeping was truly world-class today," Tiziano Caressa, the other commentator, supplemented. Sighing audibly, the commentator continued, "It's funny how a single instance can change the game outcome in multiple ways. Had Genoa managed to draw the game and go home with a point, then Mattia Perin, the Genoa keeper, would have become the undisputable Man of the Match today. But that 97th-minute goal from Zachary cast a blemish on his incredible performance. He has missed the Man of the Match honor, and the saddest part is that he lost it to Zachary Bemba, the only player who managed to overpower his goalkeeping skills and win the match for Juventus."

"Talking about Zachary," Fabio Crudeli chipped in with a chuckle, "The young ball wizard's form in the second half of this Serie A season is really incredible. He just can't stop putting up phenomenal displays on the field of play, and he also can't stop scoring. He has achieved remarkable growth and pushed his skills to a world-class level in just a few months. I remember that during November, right before Zachary won the Golden Boy, we were still debating whether he was qualified to make it into the shortlist of the Ballon d'Or. But four months later, he has already evolved into a terrifyingly monstrous razor-sharp version of his former self on the field of play. He is, without a doubt, Juventus' most important player, and they couldn't have achieved all their success this season without his input."

"Yeah, Zachary's form is just something else this season," Tiziano Caressa said. "When I'm watching him on the field of play, it's as if I'm seeing a combined version of great players like Andrea Pirlo, David Beckham, Zinedine Zidane, and Ronaldinho. His flair with the ball is something I can't describe with words. It's simply world-class. But that's not all. He is also a terrifyingly well-balanced player who can play multiple crucial roles on the field. If you manage to stop his dribbles, he will switch to playing like a Maestro and unleash deadly defense-splitting passes. If you flood the defensive midfield with bodies to stop him from finding spaces, he will simply shrug that off and then float into the wings, where he can initiate one-versus-one battles to destroy your wing-backs. And if everything else fails, he can create a free-kick opportunity and convert it with his incredible set-piece conversion skills. Whatever you throw at him is always not enough, and I can't think of a way to really stop him from performing his magic on the playing field."

"In midweek, Zachary scored four goals against Bayer 04 Leverkusen to take his Champions League tally to 14 goals this season," Fabio Crudeli stated. "Today, he has scored a late winner against a tenacious Genoa side and taken his Serie A tally to 29 goals. He has also already found the back of the net five times in the Coppa Italia and twice in the Supercoppa Italiana. His overall seasonal total in all competitions is now a staggering 50 goals, and I can't help but wonder when this boy will stop scoring!"

"I don't think the boy will stop scoring," Tiziano Caressa declared. "He has all the confidence and momentum at this point. As long as he remains fit, there won't be anything to stop him from giving opponents hell and scoring more goals."

"Zachary's form has been significant in Juventus' conquest for glory this season," Fabio Crudeli said. "As we speak, Coach Max Allegri's men have already amassed a total of 80 points just after playing their 28th of the total 38 Serie A matches scheduled for this season. After their win today, they extended their lead over the second-placed AS Roma to 30 points. Of course, Roma has the opportunity to narrow the gap again when they face Cesena away from home tonight. But if the team from Rome happens to lose, Juventus would only need one more draw to win this year's Serie A title. We're witnessing a weird season where Juventus has dominated the league without losing even a single game."

"Let's keep our fingers crossed as we wait for AS Roma's away game against Cesena tonight at 8:45 PM," Tiziano Caressa said. "AS Roma will have to put up a commanding performance and win the game. Or else, they will risk handing the trophy to Juventus much earlier than expected..."

The commentators continued discussing the Italian Serie A as the fans, who had just watched the match, moved out of the stadium. The two men also talked about multiple topics, including the upcoming international break, the performances of other teams, and some gossip revolving around famous footballers playing in the Italian Serie A. They only stopped their chatter and departed from the commentator's booth right after the clock hands around Turin pointed to the 6:30 PM mark.

Chapter 548 After the Game

Zachary returned to the dressing room after going through the mandatory post-match interviews. He didn't spend much time conversing with his teammates but headed to the bathrooms, where he enjoyed a relaxing cold shower.

Fifteen minutes later, he emerged from the shower feeling refreshed. He changed into a brand-new Juventus tracksuit and then said his goodbyes to his teammates and coaches. As usual, a few players more familiar with him tried to invite him to the post-match victory celebrations in the city. He rejected them in the politest way he could think of before matching out of the locker room. He walked quickly with a slight swagger in his step and soon arrived at the parking lot reserved for the Juventus players.

More than two hours had elapsed since the end of the match between Juventus and Genoa, and the clock hands around Turin had already pointed to the seven o'clock mark. The sun had just descended below the horizon in the west, and the evening had begun to cast its dusky gown upon the city. But even then, the enthusiastic Juventus fans, who should have already headed home, were still camping around the parking lot. They stood beyond the barricades created by the security team, eager to catch brief glimpses of the players leaving the stadium.

"Zachary! We love you..."

"Zachary! Nice play today..."

"Zachary! An Autograph..."

A commotion broke out beyond the barricades of the parking lot as Zachary slowly made his way to his car. He, of course, waved back to the fans while smiling to acknowledge their support. However, he ignored all their requests for autographs.

Zachary was really exhausted after playing more than 90 minutes of intensive Serie A football. He couldn't spare any time for the fans, as all he could think about was to return home and begin his post-match recovery. Zachary also desired to enjoy a sumptuous home-cooked meal before heading to bed early. That way, he would be fresh and well-rested before traveling to Abidjan, Ivory Coast, the following evening.

"Boss! Congratulations upon yet another impressive performance."

A buff man with well-trimmed dark hair, prominent sideburns, and sharp blue eyes greeted Zachary as he approached his Audi RS 7. His name was Lorenzo Riccardo, and he was the bodyguard Zachary had hired about a month ago. On top of being skilled in both hand-to-hand and armed combat, the man was also proficient in many other areas. He had taken over from Angelo as Zachary's driver and was always acting as his shadow whenever he moved around Turin.

"Thanks, Lorenzo!" Zachary replied with a smile. "Let's get out of here. I really can't wait to reach home. I feel like I will collapse if I don't get some rest soon."

With that said, they both got into the car, and Lorenzo started the engine. With expert ease, he eased the car out of the parking spot, and a few minutes later, they were already moving through the lane heading away from the stadium.

As the car moved, the fans camping beyond the road continued yelling Zachary's name. He rolled down the window and waved at them. But that simple action sent them into more frenzy, and the bolder ones couldn't hold in their urge to rush towards the car.

Fortunately for Zachary, the stadium security did their job well and prevented the fans from blocking his departure away from the stadium. And since there were no obstructions, Lorenzo successfully guided the car into the main road and sped off towards Pinerolo, Turin, where Zachary's mansion was located.

After spending more than half a year in Turin, Zachary had already become familiar with all the sights along the road from the Juventus Stadium to his mansion. He turned away from the passing scenery beyond the car window and focused on his phone.

Leaning back into the car seat, he browsed the current sports news on his phone. He switched from page to page and ignored most of the information and gossip online until a certain headline caught his eye.

"Juventus to face off against Real Madrid in the Champions League quarter-finals," the headline read. "Who will come out on top after this battle between football giants?"

Zachary was not surprised by the news of Juventus having to face off against Real Madrid in the Champions League quarter-finals. He had followed the quarter-final draw on Friday and was aware of who would face whom in the next stage of the prestigious European competition.

Borussia Dortmund would face Monaco, Juventus would battle Real Madrid, Paris Saint Germain would take on Barcelona, and finally, FC Porto would play Bayern Munich. The respective teams would play away and home legs in their bids to qualify for that year's UEFA Champions League semi-finals.

Having already known about the Juventus vs. Real Madrid fixture, The author, who happened to go by the name Mitch Brown, wasn't so objective with his analysis of the two teams. He wrote about how Zachary turned his focus to the article comparing the two teams. At first, he was reading it eagerly, but after a few minutes, he creased his brows with displeasure.

The author, who happened to go by the name Mitch Brown, wasn't so objective with his analysis of the two teams. He wrote about how Juventus and Real Madrid were equal on most fronts, including squad depth, current form, team creativity, and so on and so forth. But when concluding the article, the writer mentioned something that displeased Zachary. He boldly declared that Juventus would lose to Real Madrid after the two quarter-final legs simply because the team from Turin lacked the rich experience the Spanish giants had already amassed playing at that stage of the Champions League.

Being a player who had already fallen in love with playing at Juventus, Zachary couldn't accept such a declaration. He just shook his head and switched to another article. But that was after vowing to prove Mitch Brown wrong when Juventus finally battled against Real Madrid. He would prepare adequately for the quarter-final that was less than a month away and do his all to help his team overcome Real Madrid.

"Bzzt Bzzzt! Bzzt Bzzzt!"

Zachary's phone vibrated and interrupted his browsing a few seconds later. On noticing that the call was from Eric Bailly, his former teammate on Rosenborg's team, he readily tapped the accept button and held the phone against his ear.

"What's up, Zachary?" Eric Bailly's voice sounded from the phone speaker. "How are you doing?"

"I'm doing okay," Zachary replied. "How about you?"

"Also doing okay," Eric said. "But by looking at the current sports news, I can confidently say I'm not doing as great as you. Your skills have evolved quickly, and you're scoring goals like nothing. Congrats, man!"

"Thanks." Zachary chuckled. "I have also been following the Premier League, and you're not doing bad yourself! You have already solidified your position as one of the main center-backs of Tottenham. I guess congrats are in order."

"Thanks!" Eric said from the other end of the line. "I can't fall behind after seeing you achieve all the success. I have been working hard to improve my skills."

"I'm glad to hear that," Zachary said. "As Coach Johansen used to say, the sky is the limit if we continue working hard. How's Kasongo, by the way?"

"He's doing fine. I thought you guys were in touch. Why are you asking me about him?"

"I think he decided to give me the cold shoulder after the news of my switching citizenship to Ivory Coast started circulating on the web. Sometimes, he doesn't pick up my calls. And when he does, he only complains about how I betrayed my homeland."

Eric Bailly chuckled. "That's Kasongo for you. He doesn't mince words when expressing his displeasure. But since you guys go back a long time, he should be able to accept your reasons for switching nationality if you talk to him."

"I hope that is the case."

"Well, that brings me to my reason for calling," Eric Bailly continued. "There's word going around that you'll join us in Abidjan for the friendlies against Angola and Equatorial Guinea."

"That's true. Of course, I can't ignore my first invite to the national football team."

"Excellent!" Eric Bailly said excitedly. "When do you plan to travel?"

"Tomorrow evening. My flight is scheduled to take off from Turin at 7:15 PM tomorrow. I should arrive in Abidjan at around 1:00 PM the day after."

"That's a long flight," Eric Bailly said. "I'm also traveling tomorrow evening. But I'll arrive in Abidjan much earlier than you. Let's link up when we get there. Since it is your first time in Côte d'Ivoire, I'm volunteering to be your guide. I'll show you around the place. What do you think?"

"No problem," Zachary said. "Let's link up after arriving in Abidjan. Even though I already have a guide, I will still rely on you to introduce you to my new teammates."

"Someone seems to be under pressure. Don't worry! Most of those on the Ivorian National Football team are eager to have you on the squad. They won't give you any hard time as you try to fit in."

"Then, that will be a relief," Zachary said. "I don't wish to butt heads with anyone just after joining the team."

"I don't think such a scenario will happen," Eric declared. "Just feel at ease. You'll get a warm welcome when you arrive in Abidjan. You'll even be overwhelmed by the fans and coaches willing to welcome you to the National Football team."

"Okay, Eric," Zachary said, choosing not to linger on the topic. "I'm just from playing a match. Let's end our conversation here so I can get some rest."

"Sure!" Eric said. "We'll have all the time to catch up when we meet in Abidjan the day after tomorrow. So, good night and see you soon."

"See you soon! Bye."

Zachary ended the call. Right then, he noticed that Lorenzo, his new bodyguard, was already easing the car into the driveway heading to his estate. He shoved the phone into his pocket and leaned back into his seat as they approached his mansion.

Chapter 549 To Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire

Having eaten a sumptuous home-cooked dinner prepared by Inger, Zachary headed to his bedroom. He was soon in autopilot mode, packing his luggage for the following day's trip to Côte d'Ivoire, calling Emily Anderson, his agent, going through a relaxing therapeutic yoga routine, and washing up.

He finished everything he had planned to do by 8:30 PM and then made his way back to the living room. After picking a glass of water from the fridge, he settled into a sofa facing the TV screen to follow the game between Cesena and AS Roma, the second-placed team after Juventus on top of the Italian Serie A table.

That match that could determine whether Juventus would win the Serie A title much earlier than expected kicked off at 8:45 PM. AS Roma, which happened to be the team that wished to stop Juventus from widening the gap at the top of the table, was the first to settle down in the game.

Even at an away ground, the AS Roma players were daring enough to quickly array themselves in an attacking 4-3-3 formation before beginning their relentless assaults on Cesena, the home team. They combined long ball and wing play strategies to sustain pressure on the opponents during the opening stages. And finally, during the 41st minute, their efforts paid off, and they found a breakthrough. Daniele De Rossi, their captain and holding midfielder, gave them the lead after finding the back of the net with a left-footed shot from outside the box.

The score was then 1:0 in favor of AS Roma, the visiting team, and the game continued after a short spell of celebrations. The AS Roma players didn't continue risking to commit many bodies forward. Instead, they played it safe and settled into a 4-5-1 defensive formation to weather the attacks thrown at them by the visitors for the remainder of the game.

Their tenacity on the defensive end was commendable, and they worked like untiring maniacs to thwart all attempts at their goal. They eventually maintained their lead and won the game with a score of 1:0 after three minutes of injury time.

With that victory, the AS Roma players pushed their overall tally to 53 points after playing their 28th Serie A game of the season. Of course, a massive 27-point gap still existed between them and the flying Juventus team. But at least they had done all they could to stop the team from Turin from winning the title after the next Italian Serie A match day.

"Seems like AS Roma isn't willing to hand you the Serie A title on a silver platter," Coach Bjørn Peters, who had watched the match with Zachary, commented after the final whistle sounded. "You and your teammates will most likely have to toil for four more points before winning this year's trophy."

"I think that's much better for us as one of the biggest teams in Europe," Zachary said. "Instead of relying on others to hand us the domestic trophy, it's much more preferable that we toil for it and win it solely because of our efforts and skills. Achieving victory in such a manner will be much more satisfying than winning due to the inadequacy of our opponents."

"True," Coach Bjørn Peters agreed. Inclining his head to glance at Zachary, he asked, "You're setting off for Côte d'Ivoire tomorrow evening. Is that right?"

"Yes," Zachary answered.

"Are you traveling alone, or will you move with Lorenzo?"

"Lorenzo is my bodyguard. I have to travel with him to ensure my security. Aside from him, there will also be Kristin. She will help me handle some miscellaneous issues when we're in Côte d'Ivoire."

"That's a big entourage," Coach Bjørn Peters remarked. "But I like it. With Kristin and Lorenzo on your side, I won't have to worry about your security and health."

Zachary chuckled at that. He was already dozing at that point. So, he quickly ended the conversation after a minute or so and returned to his bedroom for the night.

Not having a girlfriend also had its perks. Zachary no longer had to talk on the phone for hours every night. He switched it off without any fear or favor and jumped into bed with the swiftness of an assassin. A minute later, he slowly started sinking into a relaxing slumber while anticipating his first trip to Ivory Coast.

The following evening.

The sun was setting, and the clock hands around Turin had just pointed to the 6:00 o'clock mark when Zachary set off for the airport together with his entourage of two. Lorenzo, the bodyguard dressed in

black jeans with a matching black t-shirt, was in the driving seat, guiding the Audi RS 7 forward on the road heading to the airport. On the other hand, Kristin, Zachary's personal assistant, sat beside him in the back, updating him about what to look out for when they arrived in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire.

"I talked to a friend of my dad working for the Norwegian Embassy in Abidjan," Kristin said. "Her advice for us was to remain extremely vigilant, particularly in the neighborhoods of Abobo, Adjamé, Treichville, Yopougon, and Attacoubé due to a high level of crime in those areas. She also warned me against moving about in the evening or during night hours since criminal activity escalates to unbearable levels after dusk. She also talked about the risk posed by demonstrations that could quickly turn violent at any time. Aside from that, she emphasized the need to watch out for the ever-present terrorist threats while in Abidjan..."

Kristin's speech was full of warnings. Her depiction made Côte d'Ivoire seem like 'some hell on earth' where robbers, thieves, terrorists, and prostitutes suffering from sexually transmitted diseases could jump on you any moment. It seemed she had done ample research, but that research only focused on the negatives to ensure their group remained safe during their short stay in Abidjan.

Zachary listened to her attentively but still chose to internalize her warnings with a pinch of salt. As a person who had already lived in both Europe and the DRC, he had long understood that the perceptions of most Europeans toward African countries could be prejudiced at times. Of course, Zachary knew that criminal activities existed in Côte d'Ivoire, but they shouldn't be as exaggerated as those portrayed by European media. As such, security wasn't one of his main worries as he traveled to Abidjan.

"Did you manage to book us a hotel?" Zachary asked when Kristin finished her address.

"There was no need for me to book one as Mr. Omar Sangare had already reserved a hotel for us," Kristin said. "Let me see... The one he reserved is called Hôtel Ivoire, and from what I have seen on the internet, it's probably the best in the country."

"Oh! Then, that's good," Zachary said with a smile. "Mr. Sangare is already doing a good job as our guide even before we arrive."

"Yes, he's really meticulous," Kristin agreed. "He has already sent over a schedule listing all the to-do activities while we are in Ivory Coast. On the list, there are training sessions with Côte d'Ivoire's National Football team, press conferences, two dinners, and meetings with Ivorian football executives. If you are to go by his plan, you won't have any time to rest when we arrive in Ivory Coast."

"Of course, I won't be attending all those activities," Zachary said with a shake of his head. "I'm in Ivory Coast mainly to play football. So, aside from the training sessions and mandatory press conferences, send a message to Mr. Sangare and reject all the other activities on the schedule. Do it now, before we arrive at the airport."

"Okay." Kristin nodded. "I'll send Mr. Sangare a message right away."

As they conversed, Lorenzo navigated the traffic, and forty minutes later, they finally arrived at the airport. After finding safe parking for their vehicle, they entered the airport with their suitcases. Without drawing much attention to themselves, they quickly went through airport procedures before heading to the departure gate.

After a short wait of about fifteen minutes, they boarded the plane and settled into their first-class seats. Before long, they heard the pre-flight safety announcements, and just after a few more minutes, the plane took off from the runway and soared into the skies. It would make one stop-over in Casablanca before continuing its long flight to Abidjan.

The following day, at around 1:00 PM, the plane touched down on the runway of the Félix-Houphouët-Boigny International Airport in Abidjan. After a few seconds of smooth braking by the pilots, it came to a halt close to the end of the runway.

Zachary and his entourage followed the other passengers to exit the plane. He had already donned a wide-brimmed sun hat and a pair of oversized retro-shades to conceal his face. No one recognized that he was a famous footballer, and he looked like any other Côte d'Ivoire citizen returning from abroad with two European friends as he descended the airstair. Together with Kristin and Lorenzo, they dodged most of the commotion and quickly headed toward the airport's arrivals section.

"Zachary! You're finally here. Welcome to Abidjan."

A tall African man with pronounced cheekbones, a bald head, and an oversized goatee greeted them at the arrivals gate. Before Zachary could ask who the person was, the man pulled them to one side of the hallway and continued, "I'm Omar Sangare. We have been communicating on the phone."

"Oh, Omar Sangare!" Zachary exclaimed, a light bulb going on in his mind. "It's nice to meet you in the flesh, Mr. Sangare. Thanks for making time to welcome us."

"It's my duty," Mr. Sangare said and then shook hands with Kristin and Lorenzo. Then after asking how their trip had been, he went straight to the point, "Let's not waste much time here. I'll help you to go through the airport procedures quickly before transporting you to your hotel."

Mr. Sangare was very prudent and didn't take up much of their time with pointless small talk. He aided them through all the airport and immigration procedures in a record time of about a dozen minutes before leading them to the luggage claim hall. With his help, Zachary and company didn't face any challenges, and in just a few minutes, they walked out with their suitcases in tow. They then headed towards the airport exit while conversing among themselves.

"Many football officials, journalists, and fans have been anticipating the arrival of the footballers on the National Football team," Mr. Omar Sangare said. "We intend to organize a small gathering today so they can interact with the players who have just returned. Most of your new teammates, including Yaya Touré, Gervinho, Max Gradel, Wilfried Bony, Eric Bailly, and Ousmane Viera, will all be present. Are you sure you don't wish to join the fun?"

"I think I should rest for today," Zachary said resolutely. "I have been traveling since yesterday. I must give my body ample time to recover before I attend training tomorrow. So, I'm sorry, but I can't join the gathering."

"That's okay," Mr. Sangare said with a regretful sigh. "Making ample preparations for our games against Angola and Equatorial Guinea take priority over everything else. So, forget that I asked."

Zachary nodded and decided to change the topic. "In the schedule sent to us, you mentioned that the National Football team training begins at 9:00 AM tomorrow. If I remember correctly, the venue for the training should be an Abidjan-M'pouto training complex. Is that right?"

"Yes, that's the venue," Mr. Sangare replied. "It's a training complex that belongs to ASEC Mimosas, one of the biggest football clubs in Ivory Coast. You don't have to worry about not finding directions to the facility. I will personally guide you there tomorrow morning."

"Then, thanks in advance," Zachary replied.

While talking, they continued traversing the airport hallways leading to the exit. Mr. Sangare guided them through VIP sections rarely used by other passengers, and they were out of the airport facility in no time. Without drawing much attention to themselves, they boarded the already waiting convoy of cars and headed to the grand Hôtel Ivoire, where Zachary and co spent the night.

Chapter 550 SS-Grade Core Strength

The first rays of sunlight lit up Zachary's hotel room the following morning. He rubbed his still-bleary eyes before jumping out of bed and walking to the window. Inclining his head, he noticed that the sky was clear, without any blemishes of dark clouds. The weather in Abidjan seemed perfect that day, and he didn't have to worry about the possibility of rain drenching him as he went through his first training with the National Football team.

With a calm mind, he quickly turned away from the window. His gaze passed over the lavish furniture and bedding in his hotel room as he walked towards the bathroom. He washed his face, and a few minutes later, he settled down on the woolen carpet and started going through his morning yoga routine.

He performed pose after pose with the resoluteness of a monk and slowly felt his muscles stretch and relax. Beads of sweat rolled down his forehead and dampened his shirt after about forty minutes of a fast-paced full-body power yoga workout. He felt a bit lightheaded, and at that moment, he knew that he was almost hitting his limit.

Yoga was an activity that could burn calories and tone muscles. It was also a total mind-body workout that combined strengthening and stretching poses with deep breathing and meditation or relaxation. For footballers, in particular, consistent yoga practice could gradually increase their flexibility, range of motion, and core strength.

Zachary, who happened to have remained an ardent practitioner of all kinds of yoga for years, felt he was on a precipice of crossing a threshold that morning. He hardened his heart and continued performing pose after pose of fast-paced power yoga until he felt like he had shattered through a barrier within his body.

At that moment, he seemed to have transcended to a higher level of life. A blissful sensation immediately washed across his entire body, and he could have sworn that he felt his skin pores opening and closing to take in some mystical energy. He took a deep breath that allowed him to return from the

euphoric moment, and that was when he realized that a system notification had just sounded in his mind.

"DING"

"Congratulations!" The system AI's voice was as crisp and clear as ever in Zachary's mind. "The user has completed a hidden system mission by shattering through the barriers of muscle power and attaining SS-grade core strength mainly through consistent training efforts. As a token of support, the system has rewarded 20,000 Juju points to the user for accomplishing the feat. Please, continue working hard and attain more breakthroughs without relying on the system elixirs."

"Ehh..." Zachary's eyes widened with surprise. He had only been going through his usual morning power yoga routine as a warm-up before attending his first training session with the Ivorian National Football team. But just out of the blue, he had made a breakthrough and achieved SS-grade core strength. Moreover, that was through his own efforts without consuming a system elixir.

Thinking about the entire series of events, Zachary felt like he had just won the lottery after picking up a discarded ticket from the sidewalk. He stood up and flexed his muscles, and it was then that a sheepish smile outlined his face.

Two months back, during the Christmas break, most of his ball skills, plus agility, and body coordination attributes had all broken through to the SS grading. And now, just before he could attend his first training with the Ivorian National Football team, one of his other fitness attributes had also evolved to the same SS grade. He was developing fast as a player, and he had a gut feeling that if he could persist with his consistent training routines that covered all areas important to a professional footballer, he would continue making more breakthroughs soon.

"System!" Zachary called out in his mind. "Show me my current physical fitness and soccer technique attributes."

"DING"

"Command received. The breakdown for the user's physical fitness and soccer technique attributes will be coming up shortly."

Zachary smiled after hearing the system AI's response. He took a deep breath to calm himself down and focused on the crystal-like translucent display that had just manifested before him.

*USER STATS

->Physical Fitness (Av. Rating: SS)

Balance and Coordination: SS

Agility: SS

Strength: SS

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

"Sweet!"

Zachary's spirits brightened even further as he glanced through his physical fitness stats. Only his Stamina and endurance were yet to break through to the SS grading. If they could also shatter the limit to the next grade, he would evolve into a terrifyingly well-balanced monster of a player. He would attain a body packed with several abilities and perks that could cause envy to even the most talented footballers of the generation.

From what he had figured out after constantly utilizing the system's snooping tool, most other professional footballers possessed physical strength at the S-grading. And if their core strength went beyond the norm, it would only be at the SS grade.

For instance, Giorgio Chiellini, the Juventus center-back dubbed by many as the gladiator due to his impressive power on the pitch, only possessed strength at SS grade according to the system's snooping tool. Of course, there might be SSS-grade strength abnormalities, such as The Hulk, Mamadou Sakho, Julio Baptista, Adebayo Akinfenwa, Yaya Touré, and Zlatan Ibrahimovic, among a few others in the world of football. But their numbers on the professional football scene were minuscule for plain-to-see reasons.

If a person had such muscle power, graded at SSS, why wouldn't he go for boxing, weight lifting, or wrestling, where he would be the king with minimal training? Or better yet, why wouldn't he go for rugby or American football, the other sports with many positions that relied on impressive strength?

Why would such a person join football and allow himself to be constantly bullied by lean and weaker players like Lionel Messi and Arjen Robben, who could render his exceptional strength worthless by relying on their agility and potent dribbling skills?

Zachary was obviously not born with innate strength. He was just a player who had relied on the system and its potent elixirs, coupled with his rigorous training, to grow all his physical attributes to the S-grading and beyond. As such, his physical fitness stats were all well-balanced and not like those of innately strong players who would possess SSS-grade core strength but with other attributes that couldn't even make it past the A-grade threshold.

Moreover, Zachary's physique didn't grow buff as his attributes evolved, maybe due to the system's interference or the effect of its elixirs. Even after breaking through the SS-grade core strength threshold, he stayed the same 6'4 lean player with impressive SS-grade agility and matching body coordination. His muscles were, without a doubt, well streamlined due to his consistent training and the power contained in his body, but they were not as buff as those of heavy-weight boxers, weight lifters, and rugby players. As such, opponents would never know the astonishing depth of his strength until they experienced it personally.

"Bzzt Bzzzt! Bzzt Bzzzt!"

Zachary's phone vibrated from the nearby table as he was still caught up in his euphoria. Picking it up, he realized that the call was from Kristin. He tapped the accept button and held the phone against his ear.

"Kristin, good morning," he said.

"Good morning to you too, Zachary," Kristin replied from the other end of the line. "It's already 7:40 AM. Mr. Sangare will arrive shortly to take you to the Ivorian National Football team's training venue. You should hurry and come down to take breakfast before he reaches here."

"Okay, thanks for reminding me," Zachary said. "I'll be down in fifteen minutes. See you in a bit."

With that, Zachary ended the call. He washed up quickly in a record time of about six minutes before brushing his teeth and donning a brand-new tracksuit. Then, after arranging his messy braids and tying them into a ponytail, he exited his room, ready to rush down the stairs and towards the dining area for breakfast.

But just after taking a few more steps, he got a scare of his life. His heart skipped a beat just as he was about to collide with a silhouette just a few paces from his doorway. It was Lorenzo, Zachary's new bodyguard, and judging by the red eyes, Zachary could tell that the man must not have slept even a wink the entire night.

"Lorenzo!" Zachary regarded his new bodyguard with a weird expression. "I thought we agreed that you didn't have to camp out of my room throughout the night. Why are you here and not down in the restaurant having breakfast?"

"Boss!" Lorenzo Riccardo said with a sigh. "I chanced upon some new information while enjoying a late snuck downstairs in the bar. I heard that about two years back, Didier Drogba was robbed while staying in this very hotel. I couldn't rest at ease knowing the same incident could happen to you. So, I decided to guard the door myself until morning."

"Oh! There was such an incident." Zachary was surprised. The hotel he was in was one of the best in the country. It was the pre-eminent symbol of Abidjan's post-colonial 1960s architectural heyday, with a grand feel and atmosphere reminiscent of the palaces of old about it. Moreover, it usually hosted many dignitaries that visited Côte d'Ivoire, and numerous security units usually kept watch around its premises. So, how could a robbery incident happen in such a hotel?

"Boss!" Lorenzo said. "After hearing the rumors, I did some research. From some past web articles, I confirmed that the incident really happened."

"Oh, okay," Zachary said with a nod. "Thanks for your hard work, then. But since you didn't sleep at night, how will you manage to stay awake during the day?"

"Don't worry about me, boss," Lorenzo said with a smile. "I'll squeeze in a few hours of sleep while you're undergoing training. That should be enough for me."

"Okay." Zachary nodded and decided to inquire no further. "I'm almost running late. If there's nothing holding you back, let's head down and have a quick breakfast before heading to the training ground."

"Okay, boss," Lorenzo answered. "Let's go."
