

Greatest 561

Chapter 561 Just A Point Away

Juventus FC 1: Empoli FC 0

"Oh, my goodness me!" Fabio Crudeli, the commentator for the day, yelled as Zachary ran to the corner flag to celebrate the goal. "Zachary has done what he does best again. He found the back of the net during the 55th minute to score Juventus' 1st goal during the 55th minute. What a season this young lad is having! He just can't stop scoring."

"Yes, indeed, he can't stop scoring," Tiziano Caressa, the other commentator, said. "I have just watched the replay. The way Zachary escaped from his marker and floated into the space before the Empoli defense was just ingenious. He waited for the exact moment when Mirko Valdifiori, the Empoli holding midfielder, looked away from him. With perfect timing, he escaped like a fox in the box, and before Valdifiori could spot him again, he was already meeting the ball with his head and scoring the 1st goal for Juventus. His game reading and reaction to abrupt situations on the pitch is simply out of this world."

"I can't understand how he makes scoring so easy," Fabio Crudeli commented. "By the way, you're the person always with the statistics. How many goals has he scored so far this season?"

Tiziano Caressa chuckled. "Today's goal against Empoli is his 30th in the Serie A. He has also found the back of the net five times in the Coppa Italia, twice in the Supercoppa Italiana, and fourteen times in the UEFA Champions League. Aside from that, he also scored two goals during his debut games for Ivory Coast. As such, he has now netted a grand total of 53 goals in all competitions this season."

Fabio Crudeli whistled on hearing the statistics. "I don't think there is any player in Europe who can compete with him in terms of scoring this season. He might go home with the golden boots of all the competitions this season."

Tiziano Caressa laughed. "Juventus is now leading by a goal to nil just ten minutes into the second half. Do you think the Old Lady players will hold on to this advantage and win the game?"

"Well... I can't answer that," Fabio Crudeli said. "The Juventus players have lacked the sharpness they usually possess during today's game. The midfielders have not played many forward passes, and because of that, their strikers have not gotten many touches within Empoli's box. If they don't up their game and start creating chances, then there's a possibility that they will lose points today."

"I guess that happens when you are only four points away from winning the Serie A title, yet you still remain with nine games before ending the season," Tiziano Caressa said.

"True!" Fabio Crudeli agreed. "The Juventus players should lack the motivation to give their all, especially since they were already ahead of the second-placed AS Roma by 27 points before the game. But, of course, we can't forget that a miracle worker like Zachary is still on the pitch. Even if the whole team is playing at a below-par standard, he can still produce moments of brilliance and possibly extend Juventus' lead."

"Exactly!" Tiziano Caressa agreed. "If Juventus does win, they will only be one point away from clinching the Serie A title. That would also imply that a draw from their Saturday fixture against Parma would make them the 2014/15 Italian champions."

"All these are still ifs since today's game is yet to end," Fabio Crudeli said. "Let's first wait and see if they can hold off Empoli before counting how many more points they need to become champions..."

In the meantime, the game restarted as the commentators were discussing. The Empoli players, who had just conceded a goal, immediately started taking risks by going on the offensive. They committed numbers forward for the next twenty minutes, hoping to score and bring proceedings back to level terms.

Their efforts were quite impressive. They relied on long balls to their two strikers and wing penetration ending in crosses to mount increasing pressure upon Juventus' defense. They even came close to scoring during the 63rd, 70th, and 75th minutes. However, the impressive goal-keeping skills of Gianluigi Buffon, the world-class keeper, saved the day, thus allowing Juventus to stay ahead on all occasions.

Soon enough, the game proceeded into the final ten minutes. Maurizio Sarri, Empoli's coach, brought on all three substitutes, hoping to change the game situation. And due to the introduction of fresh legs, Empoli's attacks grew increasingly more dangerous until the men in red and blue came close to scoring during the 84th minute.

Piotr Zielinski, the substitute left midfielder, threaded a brilliant pass to Simone Verdi, another substitute who had just taken on the reins on Empoli's striking line. Simone Verdi, on his part, connected with the through ball well before unleashing a snapshot toward the bottom left corner.

It was a tense moment for the Juventus fans as the ball headed goalward, skimming over the grass like a snake traversing the jungle. Fortunately for the team from Turin, Gianluigi Buffon, the keeper, came alive at the last moment. He palmed the ball toward the left side of the box, thus saving the day and keeping Juventus in the lead again.

In the meantime, Patrice Evra, Juventus' left wing-back, had just collected the ball punched by Buffon. The Frenchman immediately controlled the ball before smashing it toward the other side of the pitch where Fernando Llorente was lurking.

Close to the center circle, Fernando Llorente held off the defender with his tall physique while bringing the ball under control. He chested it to the ground before threading a pass back into his half toward the fast-approaching Zachary.

Zachary's spatial awareness was as sharp as ever. He controlled the ball while mapping the positioning of his teammates within his mind. He then took another touch before unleashing a lofted pass that soared over the defense, heading toward the right side of the pitch, where Álvaro Morata was lurking.

"Whoosh!"

Álvaro Morata was like the wind as he connected with Zachary's first-time pass. He chested the descending ball forward and set off on a mad dash for the box. He soon skipped over a challenge from one of the Empoli holding midfielders before beating Federico Barba, the center-back, for pace.

Álvaro Morata eventually came out of the challenges on top before penetrating the box to face off against the Empoli keeper. He remained composed and looped the ball over the approaching keeper to score Juventus' 2nd goal for the night during the 85th minute.

"GOAL..." Fabio Crudeli, the commentator, yelled as the ball nestled into the back of the net. "What beautiful football! A splendid counterattack from Juventus has just seen them extend their lead to two goals during the 85th minute. It all started with Buffon palming away the ball to make that save. Then, Patrice Evra found Fernando Llorente with a long ball, who, in turn, found Zachary with a pass back into the middle. Zachary didn't waste even a second before playing a superb pass over Empoli's defense. His pass took three Empoli players out of the equation, thus setting an opportunity for Álvaro Morata, who remained composed and scored Juventus' second."

"This is team Juventus at their best," Tiziano Caressa, the other commentator, said with an audible sigh. "I believe that this goal has done it and won them the game. They are just one point away from winning the title. But surprisingly, they still remain with nine more Serie A games before ending their season. What a football season they have had!"

"I believe we're seeing the making of history," Fabio Crudeli said. "Let's not forget the fact that they are unbeaten in all competitions. They haven't lost a single game up to this point in the season. I'm beginning to believe that they are the best team in Europe at the moment."

The game commenced after the goal celebrations. The Empoli players seemed to have lost all their morale after conceding the second goal. They started committing mistakes in midfield and soon failed to maintain their zonal marking strategy in many crucial areas of the field of play.

The Juventus players, who had just built up all the momentum after scoring the second goal, didn't miss the chance to exploit the weakness of their opponents. Through their excellent midfielders, like Zachary, they maintained possession via quick exchanges of passes. Eventually, their brilliance paid off, allowing them to create a clear goal-scoring opportunity during the 90th minute.

That time around, it was Carlos Tevez, the substitute who had just stepped onto the pitch, in action. The Argentine striker pushed off the ground in the box and got to the end of a cross from Patrice Evra. He outwitted the center-backs in the air before heading the ball home to beat the keeper and score Juventus' 3rd goal for the night.

The game continued after the celebration with Empoli's kick-off. But nothing noteworthy happened during the game's closing stages. As a result, Juventus remained in the driving seat and eventually won the game by a score of 3:0 after six minutes of injury time.

With that ending, the Juventus players had taken their season tally to a whopping 83 points. They were still 27 points ahead of the second-placed AS Roma and only a draw away from winning that season's Serie A title. Their season was for the history books, as they could potentially win the trophy before playing their last nine games of the 2014/15 season.

Chapter 562 Serie A Season Decider

Juventus' following fixture was the second leg of the Coppa Italia semi-final game against Fiorentina. The match kick-off was at 8:45 PM, on Tuesday, 7th April, just three days after Juventus' game against Empoli.

During the first leg of the Coppa Italia semis held in Turin, Juventus defeated the team from Florence by a score of 3:0, with Zachary scoring a hatrick. As of now, they would again play another leg of the semis at Fiorentina's home ground to decide which one of the two teams would qualify for the 2015 Coppa Italia finals.

In the case of Juventus, there wasn't much pressure associated with that very game due to their three-goal advantage from the first leg. As such, Coach Massimo Allegri decided to rest some of his players in preparation for the upcoming busy schedule that included a season-deciding Serie A away fixture against Parma the following Saturday and the vital UEFA Champions League quarter-final against Real Madrid the Tuesday after.

On Coach Allegri's squad for the day was Marco Storari as the keeper and a defense set-up that included Paolo De Ceglie, Giorgio Chiellini, Leonardo Bonucci, and Simone Padoin. In the midfield were the four players - Stefano Sturaro, Claudio Marchisio, Arturo Vidal, and Roberto Pereyra, while on striking were the two forwards - Alessandro Matri and Álvaro Morata. The coach's game plan was for these players to array themselves into a 4-3-1-2 formation so as to handle Fiorentina's progressive wing play and abrupt long balls.

The squad was obviously not Juventus' strongest, as the coach had left key players like Gianluigi Buffon, Zachary Bamba, Andrea Pirlo, Patrice Evra, Stephan Lichtsteiner, Fernando Llorente, and Carlos Tevez on the bench. But even then, even with all the big names missing from the starting line-up, Juventus still showed why they were the footballing giants of Italy immediately after the game started.

Juventus played a good passing game of slow build-ups and sudden quick transitions into the final third from the first minute. The men from Turin then focused on penetrating through the ranks of Fiorentina until they eventually scored the first goal through Alessandro Matri during the 22nd minute.

However, that was not the end of Fiorentina's misery, as Juventus didn't let up the pressure after scoring. The Turin-based team continued creating chances and building up more momentum. Eventually, a perfect finish from Roberto Pereyra just before halftime and a header from Leonardo Bonucci during the 59th minute sealed the deal, thus ensuring that Juventus won the game by a score of 3:0 after four minutes of added time.

Juventus had played the perfect possession game that day, and not even the future footballing stars like Mohamed Salah and Marcos Alonso in Fiorentina's line-up could prevent the result. And accordingly, the win decided Juventus' fate as the team that would face off against Lazio in that year's Coppa Italia finals.

Four days later, on Saturday, 11th April, Juventus returned their focus to Serie A action. They traveled to the Emilia-Romagna region and faced off against Parma in the very-packed Ennio Tardini Stadium.

That game was a crucial season decider for Juventus, as they needed only one more point from the match to win the league and become the 2014/15 Serie A champions. But even then, Coach Allegri didn't field some of his crucial players since he still had his eyes on the UEFA Champions League quarter-final first leg against Real Madrid the following Tuesday.

Coach Allegri only made a few changes to the squad that faced Fiorentina. He replaced Leonardo Bonucci, the first-choice center-back, with Angelo Ogbonna. He also changed the striking line and replaced Álvaro Morata and Alessandro Matri, the two forwards, with Fernando Llorente and Kingsley Coman. As for the rest of the squad, it remained the same as the line-up that played the midweek Coppa Italia semis.

The match against Parma was the perfect definition of a season decider. Fans of both teams were already yelling like mad and causing tremors around the stadium with the thumping of their feet as the referee blew the whistle.

In the meantime, the match had commenced on the pitch. The Juventus players went all out and relied on their routine slow build-ups and abrupt defense-splitting passes to dominate proceedings during the early game stages. They played confidently and pushed all the Parma players into their half of the pitch as the proceedings progressed.

But as we all know; it just takes a single error for the game situation to turn for the worse. This was the case during the match that day as a mistake in distribution by Stefano Sturaro at the border of the defensive third during the 14th-minute saw team Juventus present the perfect goal-scoring chance to Parma on a silver platter.

Ishak Belfodil, the Parma striker, immediately pounced on the loose ball like the wind before Juventus' defense could react. He controlled it well and passed it back to José Mauri, Parma's midfielder, thus setting his teammate up for the perfect chance to unleash a shot toward the goal.

José Mauri, on his part, didn't disappoint. He met the ball with a first-time swing, sending it toward the top right corner. He effortlessly beat the keeper with his thunderous effort and thus scored the 1st goal for the home team during the 15th minute.

The score was then 1:0 in favor of Parma. The Juventus fans who had traveled all the way to Parma started turning anxious and edgy, clearly feeling the heat of the match. They were not even shy to verbally express their doubts over Coach Allegri's decision to rest some key players.

"I just wonder why Coach Allegri left Zachary, Andrea Pirlo, and Tevez on the bench," one Juventus fan grumbled. "Those three didn't play the semi-final against Fiorentina during midweek! Why is he resting them again? Could they be unfit?"

"I don't think so," another fan sporting a striped black and white Juventus jersey replied. "According to the news, all three have been training with the first team over the past week. I think Massimo Allegri is simply resting them in preparation for our match against Real Madrid on Tuesday."

"I don't like this," the first fan said. "Why can't we first focus on winning the Serie A before worrying about the Champions League? Because of resting the players, we might lose against Parma when we're close to winning the title."

"Patience, my friend," the other fan said. "It's just twenty minutes into the game. We only need to score a goal during the remaining 70 minutes, and this year's Serie A title will be ours. Moreover, should the game situation fail to change by the 70th minute, Coach Allegri will surely bring on the big guns like Zachary. That's why I'm not so worried about this game."

In the meantime, Zachary was also following the game from the bench. He watched expressionlessly as his teammates tried to outwit the tenacious Parma side on the playing field. However, on the inside, he was feeling a bit worried.

In football, momentum remained a very crucial factor needed to win matches. For instance, if Juventus beat Parma and won the Serie A title that weekend, they would head into Tuesday's Champions League fixture against Real Madrid with boundless confidence. They would then rely on that morale and impetus built after winning the league to perform at their best against the team from Madrid and possibly defeat them.

The opposite was also true, and if Juventus failed to beat Parma, they might head into the fixture with low spirits. As such, some players who relied on confidence would find it difficult to perform at their best. This factor would then affect the overall team's performance and possibly lead to defeat.

The worry within Zachary continued growing as he followed the proceedings on the pitch. A frown suddenly outlined his face since he couldn't understand what some of his teammates were doing on the playing field.

For instance, Kingsley Coman, Juventus' striker for the day, had just made an abrupt and well-timed run behind the defensive line. However, Roberto Pereyra, Juventus' attacking midfielder, who had the ball at that juncture, didn't send a through-ball forward. Pereyra instead chose to pass it backward to Claudio Marchisio, thus wasting Kingsley's efforts.

Six minutes later, during the 34th minute, another vexing incident occurred. Arturo Vidal received the ball close to the center line, but he took too many unnecessary touches that allowed the Parma midfielders to rob possession from him. What followed was a lightning-fast counterattack that caught Juventus' defense napping.

Fortunately, Marco Storari, the Juventus keeper for the night, was at the top of his game. He made a fingertip diving save and pushed the final rocket of a ball from the Parma striker over the bar. And with that, he managed to keep Juventus' hope of a comeback alive by keeping the score 1:0.

"This game is becoming difficult for us," Patrice Evra, the Frenchman sitting beside Zachary on the bench, commented. "Both Vidal and Pereyra are taking too long on the ball. They have invited trouble repeatedly by allowing the Parma midfielders to close them down. Moreover, they haven't made many forward passes during today's game."

Zachary nodded. "Yes! Their midfield play has been below-par, especially over the past ten minutes. They have also wasted a few good runs made by Llorente and Coman behind the defense. Coach Allegri will surely grill them at halftime."

Evra sighed. "Our carelessness is allowing the Parma players to grow in confidence as the game progresses. Their pass completion and possession statistics have all improved over the past few minutes. We'll surely find it hard to win this game if we don't score soon."

Zachary nodded but chose not to reply. Just then, he noticed Maurizio Trombetta, the assistant coach, exchanging a few words with Coach Allegri. The assistant then nodded and immediately approached the bench with a solemn expression.

"Zachary, Pirlo, and Tevez!" He called out three names. "Start warming up immediately. The coach wants you to enter the pitch at the beginning of the second half."

"Yes, coach," The three players, including Zachary, replied, one after another. They then donned their bibbs and headed to the touchline area, ready to warm up.

Chapter 563 Controlling The Tempo Of The Game

More minutes passed, and soon, it was the long-awaited halftime. The players of both teams headed to the tunnel for the fifteen-minute break.

Zachary, Tevez, and Pirlo were obviously among the Juventus players who returned to the dressing room. They had to receive the coach's instructions before entering the pitch as substitutes at the beginning of the second half.

"Listen, guys," Coach Allegri immediately said after all the players had settled on the chairs around the dressing room. "During the first fourteen minutes, we played good football against Parma. But I don't know what happened after that. We all became disorganized on the pitch and started committing mistakes. Our midfielders even forgot my pre-game instructions and made a mess of the midfield. The result was Parma catching us off guard and scoring the first goal."

Coach Allegri paused for a few seconds before continuing, "I don't want to go too much into our performance for the first half. Those who performed poorly and those who played well clearly know themselves. What I will do now is plan for our second half."

"This is a game that we must win. We all know that only by putting this league to bed and winning the Serie A trophy today can we create more time for ourselves to focus on the Champions League. On that note, our goals are clear, and I expect all the field players to give their all during the second half."

"I want to see each one of you playing brilliant football. I want to see all of you exhibiting world-class decision-making while on the field of play. And more than anything, I want to see you breaking apart the opponents' formation and creating chances to score goals."

"I'll make a few substitutions for the second half," Coach Allegri continued. "Zachary will replace Roberto Pereyra and become our attacking midfielder, Andrea Pirlo will replace Arturo Vidal in central midfield, and Carlos Tevez will enter the fray as a substitute for Stefano Sturaro."

"Kingsley Coman! Where are you?" The coach asked, looking around.

"Here," Kingsley immediately replied and raised his arm.

Coach Allegri nodded at him. "During the second half, you'll surrender the striking position to Carlos Tevez. Instead, you'll fall back and play as our new left midfielder. In that position, you'll collaborate with Andrea, Marchisio, and Zachary to build up play from the middle and left-wing areas before creating chances for our two strikers. Understood?"

"Yes, coach," Kingsley replied with a spirited voice.

Coach Allegri nodded again and turned to Zachary. "Zachary!" He said. "Your role during the second half will only be to find gaps in their defensive shape before capitalizing on them. I want to see you sending as many through-balls as possible to Fernando Llorente and Carlos Tevez. Aside from that, I also want you to try your luck from outside the box so that we can slowly add more pressure on Parma's defense. All in all, play as usual and ensure that we score. But please remember to protect yourself from injuries while on the pitch. Okay?"

"Yes, coach," Zachary replied.

"Very good." The coach smiled and swept his gaze across the rest of the players. "The same goes for each and every other player. Play brilliant none-contact football and release the ball as fast as possible to avoid injuries. Avoid taking unnecessary risks like dribbling past several opponents. If we do that, we'll also be able to avoid committing unnecessary mistakes like loss of possession during critical moments. Understood?"

"Yes, coach!" The players replied in unison.

Coach Allegri nodded and said, "May luck shine upon us. Let's go out there and destroy those stubborn opponents. Let's beat Parma and become Serie A Champions tonight. Are we together?"

"Yes, coach," the players' voices were more spirited as they replied.

The coach smiled and said a few concluding remarks concerning the formation and game plan. By the time he finished, fifteen minutes had almost elapsed, and he sent his players back to the pitch for the second half.

The fourth official raised the substitution board immediately after halftime. On cue, Zachary, Andrea Pirlo, and Carlos Tevez entered the pitch, one after another, amid thunderous applause from the traveling Juventus fans. After the substitutes took their positions, the referee blew the whistle, and the second half of the Serie A battle between Parma and Juventus commenced.

Most substitutes would usually make the mistake of trying to jump right into the heat of things after entering the game. They would attempt to immediately make an impact by going for the spectacular or taking unnecessary risks to prove their worth to the coaches as soon as possible.

However, Zachary knew better than to commit such a silly mistake. As a substitute midfielder, his first 'course of action' after stepping onto the pitch was not to attempt spectacular dribbles or unleash long-range rockets of shots toward the opponent's goal. Instead, it was to make his presence in midfield known to his teammates by exchanging as many accurate passes as possible.

The more accurate passes he exchanged with his teammates, the more the other Juventus players would subconsciously trust his abilities to change the game. And the more trust he gained, the more his teammates would try to look for him whenever they were on the ball.

Zachary did just that after stepping onto the pitch. He spent the first ten minutes of the second half exchanging quick but accurate passes with the teammates around him. His SS-graded passing techniques allowed him to receive the ball well with a single touch before distributing it quickly with his second touch.

More minutes passed, and Zachary became a midfield pivot within the Juventus line-up. His swift and accurate passing gradually evoked feelings of confidence and a sense of urgency in all his teammates. They soon became comfortable on the ball and started playing brilliant football while dictating proceedings on the field. They even continued hoarding more and more of the possession as the game progressed.

In the meantime, the Parma players had chosen to shrink back into their half and go on the defensive. They had even arrayed themselves into a 5-4-1 formation, seemingly to defend their one-goal advantage until the final whistle sounded.

Zachary had already analyzed their set-up and knew their intentions. The gears in his mind turned quickly, and he decided to act and go on the offensive before it was too late.

After receiving a return pass from Andrea Pirlo during the 61st minute, he whirled around and skipped past Cristobal Jorquera, one of Parma's midfielders. He then sidestepped past another opponent before creating a few yards of space for himself close to the border of the final third.

At that exact moment, his SS-graded Spatial awareness worked like a charm, and he spotted Kingsley Coman making a penetrating and spirited run behind the defense on the left flank. Zachary acted with all the haste he could muster. He unleashed a grounded ball in-between the defensive lines and sent it towards the unmarked pocket of space behind the defender on the left wing.

Pedro Mendes, one of Parma's defenders, tried intercepting the ball as it headed toward its intended target. But due to the perfect timing of the release, his efforts were futile, and the ball slowly arrived in the unmarked pocket of space before Kingsley Coman.

"Whoosh..."

Kingsley Coman was like the wind as he stormed forward and connected with Zachary's pass a few yards from the touchline on the left wing. He controlled the ball midstride before the Parma defenders could react and then continued his mad diagonal dash toward the box.

At that point, another Parma defender had already reacted and raced back to block Kingsley's run at the edge of the box. However, Kingsley didn't tango with the Parma player. Instead, he squared the ball into the middle towards the edge of the box, where Zachary was arriving.

Zachary's game reading was as potent as ever, and he effortlessly connected with Kingsley's pass after another stride forward. But just as he was about to pull the trigger and attempt to score, another defender rushed in from the right side and blocked his shooting angle.

Zachary, though, didn't panic. His SS-graded spatial awareness, risk assessment, and ball control attributes came into play. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a trace of a silhouette, donning Juventus' black and white jersey, driving into the box from the right side. Without hesitation, Zachary took another touch and released a very light pass toward the sprinting course of the figure in question.

"Ahh..."

The defender before Zachary gasped as the seemingly slow ball passed a few inches beyond his left foot. But since he had been angling his body towards his right side to block Zachary, he couldn't realign his posture in time and get to the ball. He could only turn his head awkwardly to see Carlos Tevez, another Juventus substitute, connecting with Zachary's pass inside his box.

"Pa..."

Carlos Tevez was as sharp as ever. He had already beaten the offside trap with his well-timed run and connected with Zachary's pin-point pass. He remained composed and blasted the ball past the keeper and into the roof of the net to score Juventus' 1st goal for the night. On cue, Stadio Ennio Tardini exploded into a wave of thunderous cheers as he turned around and headed towards Zachary to celebrate the equalizer.

Chapter 564 Another Trophy In The Bag

Fabio Crudele was once again the commentator for the game. He waited until the thunderous cheers subsided before clearing his voice and saying, "Well, well, well! Juventus has finally scored the long-awaited equalizer. Brilliant midfield play from Zachary Bemba and Kingsley Coman allowed them to penetrate through Parma's tenacious defensive set-up. The on-form Argentine striker - Carlos Tevez then completed the brilliant passage of play. He connected with Zachary Bemba's well-timed pass before blasting the ball past the keeper to score Juventus' 1st goal during the 62nd minute. The score is now back to level terms with 28 minutes remaining."

"This is Juventus at its best," David Ferrini, the co-commentator, remarked. "They are a team destined to become champions. They always have many dangerous options on the bench that can change the game situation. They also have great team spirit and incredible teamwork, especially when it matters. You can never say you have beaten them until you hear the final whistle."

Fabio Crudele chuckled. "Coach Allegri's halftime changes were spot on. He showed a clear intent to win the game by bringing on Carlos Teves, Andrea Pirlo, and Zachary Bemba, who are by far his best players this season. These three changed the game considerably and allowed Juventus to dominate proceedings during the second half. Juventus' midfield has especially been excellent with the addition of Zachary and Pirlo. The midfielders are like a well-oiled machine, exchanging passes to break down Parma's tenacious formation."

"True," David Ferrini, the co-commentator, agreed. "That passage of play that resulted in the first goal started with Pirlo before Zachary did his magic by picking out Kingsley's well-timed run. This ability to spot such opportunities, even during the most tense of moments, is what has allowed Zachary to become a world-class midfielder in a record time of a few months."

"Well, Juventus have finally gotten their equalizing goal," Fabio Crudeli remarked. "If things stay as they are now for the rest of the night, they will win the Serie A even before the second-placed AS Roma play their game tomorrow afternoon. They will have accumulated 84 points in just 30 matches, and no other team will catch up with them even if they lose their remaining eight games this season."

"Yeah," David Ferrini, the co-commentator, acquiesced. "They are in a very advantageous position to win the Serie A trophy before playing their last eight games. But what do you think they will do now? Will Coach Allegri instruct his men to play it safe and go on the defensive for the remaining minutes? Or will he tell them to continue attacking and go at the opponents with all the intensity they can muster so that they can win the Serie A in style?"

"I think the Juventus players will go all out to win the game," Fabio Crudeli said. "With players like Zachary, Pirlo, and Tevez on the field, they will most likely continue attacking and creating more goal-scoring chances. And since they have already successfully broken through Parma's defensive set-up once, they will likely do it again and get their winning goal."

"Good prediction," David Ferrini said. "I'm also of the same view. But let's first return our focus to the game, which has already restarted."

The commentators were totally right with their predictions. The Juventus players didn't choose to go on the defensive after scoring the equalizer. Instead, they maintained an offensive attitude and attacked Parma's defense like crazy.

It was as if the goal they scored had reinvigorated their spirits. Each of the Juventus players raised their game to the next level within those remaining twenty-something minutes. And together with their brilliant midfielders, like Zachary, Andrea Pirlo, and Claudio Marchisio, they dominated proceedings and hoarded about 70% of the possession. After that, it wasn't long before they started creating clear-cut chances that almost resulted in goals.

For instance, Zachary initiated a counterattack by playing a first-time pass toward Kingsley after a failed Parma corner kick during the 71st minute. Kingsley, on his part, did well to advance the counter. He drove into the heart of Parma's defense, speeding as fast as a Formula One driver to initiate a two-versus-two situation.

The Frenchman eventually played a final ball to Fernando Llorente, one of Juventus' two strikers. But luck seemed not to be on Juventus' side, and the Parma keeper got his fingertips on the final shot from Llorente to push the ball out of play and keep proceedings on level terms.

Juventus got another clear opportunity during the 76th minute when Paolo De Ceglie, Juventus' left wing-back for the day, made a spirited run through the flank. He dashed along the touchline, using his pace to rush past two opposing players before unleashing a lofted cross toward the box from around the border of the final third.

Fernando Llorente, Juventus' striker who was naturally in the box, reacted as he should. He leaped off the ground and relied on his tall physique to tower over the Parma center-backs. He skillfully got to the end of Paolo De Ceglie's cross and guided the ball towards the top right corner with a well-timed header. But alas, the Parma keeper once again made an incredible diving save and pushed the ball out of play to keep the score 1:1 during the 77th minute.

The game resumed after a failed Juventus corner kick. The Old Lady players continued creating more chances, with the likes of Zachary, Carlos Tevez, and Kingsley Coman all coming close to scoring Juventus' second goal during the game's final ten minutes. But the abnormal heroics of Parma's keeper denied their efforts, and thus the game headed into extra time still deadlocked at a score of 1:1.

The Juventus players didn't stop attacking, though. They continued playing their possession football while patiently waiting to break through Parma's defense as the game slowly approached the 93rd minute.

It was at that point that the quiet Andrea Pirlo worked his magic. After receiving a return ball from Paolo De Ceglie close to the center circle, he unleashed a long-range diagonal pass over the entire midfield to find Zachary, who happened to have floated into the right wing.

Zachary, on his part, worked with urgency to connect with the long-range pass from Andrea. He brought the ball under control with his chest before taking another simple touch to loop it over the head of an approaching opponent. Then, his SS-graded agility and dribbling attributes worked like a charm, and he tapped the ball forward to squeeze it through the legs of another Parma player who was also closing him down.

With that nutmeg, Zachary skipped past the opponent and suddenly realized that the coast on the right wing was clear. His football instincts bloomed into splendor, and he relied on his SS-grade agility to

accelerate to top speed in no time. Just like a storm, he cut into the pitch and eventually skipped past another sliding tackle before arriving close to the edge of the box on the left flank.

By then, the Parma defenders and goalkeeper had all reacted to block his efforts. Two of Parma's center-backs were guarding strategic positions close to the edge of the box to stop Zachary from pushing into the box from the left side. As for the keeper, he was also guarding the inside of the near post to prevent him from abruptly trying out his luck and scoring from the tight angle.

A soft smile lit up Zachary's face as his eyes took the situation in. He slowed down to draw the two center-backs in before raising his foot as if to take a shot at the goal. But halfway through his swinging motion, he relaxed his leg and suddenly dug his boot under the ball. He looped it over the two defenders, sending it on a beautiful arc toward the unmarked pocket of space close to the far post, where Kingsley Coman was arriving.

Zachary's cheeky pass was like a work of art. Time seemed to come to a standstill as the ball floated over all the players in Parma's box. Then, it dipped at the right time and descended onto Kingsley Coman's head, who, in turn, finished with a simple header to score Juventus' 2nd goal for the night.

PARMA CALCIO 1 : JUVENTUS FC 2

The text on the jumbotron in the Stadio Ennio Tardini immediately shimmered and confirmed Juventus' second goal. Right on cue, the stadium exploded into a wave of cheers, and the atmosphere around the stands turned superheated. The traveling Juventus fans started singing "We're Juventus, We're Champions" as the Juventus players ran toward the touchline to celebrate Kingsley's goal.

Minutes passed, and the goal celebrations on the pitch ended. The referee blew the whistle, and the game restarted. But even then, the Juventus fans didn't calm down. They continued chanting like mad and singing at the top of their voices until the final whistle eventually sounded after seven minutes of added time.

Right at that instant, more crazy scenes started appearing in the stadium. Coach Max Allegri, who had remained calm even after Juventus scored the second goal, let out a series of incoherent loud yells. He was just like Mad Max, punching the air repeatedly with both his arms while at times half jogging and at other times half-hopping. The feat of his team winning the game and becoming Serie A champions had obviously overwhelmed him with joy, and he could only vent his excited emotions using such weird actions.

Fortunately, the coach wasn't alone in his weirdness, and thus his actions appeared normal at that juncture. His players had also already gone mad with excitement. They ran around the pitch haphazardly, like headless chickens, shouting and venting emotions. A few had even removed their shirts and thrown them to the traveling Juventus fans before returning to the pitch to continue celebrating. They obviously couldn't contain the happiness of putting the Serie A to bed and winning the League with eight games to go.

Zachary, on his part, also joined the celebrations. He moved around the pitch and waved to the Juventus fans who had traveled all the way to Parma to support their team. At that point, his soul was already swimming in an ocean of happiness, and he eventually went around hugging his coaches and teammates, one after another, to celebrate their early Serie A victory.

The only blemish to the night was that there would be no trophy presentation, as that had to wait for the final match day of the 2014/15 Serie A season. As such, the Juventus players would have to wait until the end of May before receiving their rightful silverware.

Chapter 565 Festivities And The Champions League Quarter-Final Preview

Zachary and his teammates took many interviews from reporters that night before leaving the Ennio Tardini Stadium. They then had dinner in one of the restaurants in Parma and checked into a local hotel, where they would spend the night.

Zachary was exhausted after playing fifty minutes of intensive top-flight football. He excused himself from the rest of his teammates and headed to his hotel room for the night. He then took another shower and dried himself before settling on his bed and switching on his phone for the first time that night.

Right then, notices of incoming messages from various apps on his phone started flashing on the screen. Zachary could see hundreds of WhatsApp and Facebook messages and dozens of notifications from his phone's default SMS app. There were even about ten missed call alerts that blinked on his smartphone after he switched it on.

Zachary was alarmed, wondering why he had suddenly received all those notifications. Not many people in the world had his private contact info. Usually, he would receive around two or three messages from Emily, his agent, or Kristin, his publicity secretary, during the day. And if something important came up within the team, he might receive a few more messages and calls from his teammates and coaches on his private number.

However, that day was weird, and he received hundreds of notifications on his private line. What was going on?

Zachary swallowed hard. He subconsciously started going through the notifications, especially those on his phone's default messaging app. Then, just as abruptly, a soft smile lit up his face as he realized that all were congratulatory messages from his acquaintances.

"To my most valuable client and dear friend," the first message he saw read, "Congrats on winning your first Scudetto with Juventus. It's a well-deserved victory! Your hard work, dedication, and passion for football have all paid off. You should be very proud of yourself and continue trying your best. With your talent, I believe the sky is the limit, and this is just the start of your journey to winning many more accolades. Your Agent and Friend, Emily."

"Heartiest congratulations on your team winning the Serie A title with eight games to go this season," this second message was from Kristin, Zachary's publicity secretary and personal assistant. "I believe your contribution has been a critical factor in your team's winning of the league this early. Continue striving forward, and you'll achieve even greater things."

"To the Italian champions, and to the best player on the champions' team," this message was from Paul Kasongo, his former teammate and friend. "Your teamwork, sportsmanship, and tenacity are an inspiration to me. Congratulations on achieving big things this young, my friend..."

Many more messages had come in through different platforms, including his private WhatsApp number, Instagram, and Facebook accounts. Most of his acquaintances, whether in Norway or Italy, Coach Damata in DRC, his biological mom, his former teammates from Rosenborg, his new teammates from

the Ivory Coast's national team, the old scout - Mr. Stein, Coach Johnsen, and even Camilla, all sent him congratulatory messages that night.

Zachary read through them quickly and felt how good it was to receive appreciation from people he knew. He worked with urgency and replied some messages, like the one from Emily and Kristin.

After sending the responses, he switched off the light and entered in between the sheets for the night. He let his mind wander, recalling all the crucial moments from the match against Parma before eventually sinking into a dreamless and peaceful slumber.

The following morning, at ten, Zachary sat in Juventus' team bus, which was fast approaching the city of Turin. He was idly chatting about popular sports news in Italy and sometimes bantering with a few of his teammates.

Occasionally, he would also gaze beyond the window to take in the passing scenery as the bus sped forward. He was just like a traveler returning home after a relaxing adventure.

A few more minutes passed, and the bus eventually entered Turin City. More vehicles and pedestrians started appearing on the road. Just then, an S-class black Mercedes-Benz sped up from behind and caught up with the team bus. It then started honking repeatedly as its window glass lowered. A male driver pushed his head out and yelled excitedly, "Juventus, Ole! Juventus Ole! Siamo I Campioni." The man then hollered a few more words and waved at the bus before stepping on the accelerator and speeding off.

"This..." Zachary was stunned as he glanced at the fast-fading black Mercedes-Benz. But before he could ask his teammates about what had just happened, more drivers speeding past the Juventus bus repeated the same act and continued yelling excitedly. Some were screaming catchphrases like "We're Juventus! We're Unbeatable! We're Unbwogable! We're Champions from Turin!" Then they would shout a congratulatory message at the bus before speeding off and disappearing into the distance.

But that was not the last of Zachary's surprise. That was because he soon got to experience how crazy enthusiastic Italian football fans could be as the bus turned towards the road heading to the Vinovo, Juventus' training center.

At that point, the Juventus bus was no longer moving alone on the streets. Instead, it had already attracted a convoy of honking cars, dozens of motorbikes, and hundreds of fans wearing Juventus' official colors.

The supporters, who were not in vehicles, all crowded around the bus. They continued waving black and white flags while yelling to vent their excitement. Not even the police could contain them as they tried to welcome their heroes, the Juventus players, who had just won the Serie A trophy with eight games to go.

In the meantime, some of the Juventus players who were already used to such scenes pushed their heads out of the windows and waved at the fans. A few, like Claudio Marchisio and Leonardo Bonucci, even started singing Juventus' victory slogans along with supporters. The fans, in turn, responded with more favor and became crazier. They shouted the players' names while jogging along with the bus on the street.

In that manner, the boisterous celebrations continued. The bus moved forward at a not-so-fast pace and eventually arrived at the Vinovo, where even more fans were waiting. The players exited the bus before waving to the crowd and signing a few autographs. After that, they entered the Vinovo, where they took more interviews from waiting reporters and celebrated their early league victory with the board and management. They were really having a wonderful and busy time after winning the Serie A title.

In the meantime, Emilia Vasquez's Sunday morning sports show had just commenced on ESPN. She first allowed the studio crew to broadcast the boisterous scenes of the Juventus players, the Serie A champions, arriving at the Vinovo. Then, when the clip ended, she smiled at the cameras and said, "Our dear viewers! Those were the Juventus players returning to their training ground after beating Parma by a score of 2:1 and winning the Serie A title yesternight. As you have just seen, they were welcomed by hundreds of Juventus fans waiting along the streets leading to the Vinovo."

"But enough about all that," she continued. "We're not here to discuss Juventus's celebrations after winning the Serie A trophy. Instead, we're here to review the upcoming UEFA Champions League quarter-finals scheduled for Tuesday and Wednesday nights. With me in the studio are three gentlemen, namely Alessandro Costacurta, Joshua Morales, and Charles Adams. They are our pundits today, who will help us analyze the quarter-final fixtures. But before we dive into all the excitement, let's look at the quarter-final fixtures."

As her voice sounded, the technicians in the studio worked their magic. The screens around the place shimmered before showing the upcoming UEFA Champions League quarter-final fixtures.

Quarter-Finals 1st leg

To be played on Tuesday, April 14, 2015, at 8:45 PM

->Borussia Dortmund Vs. AS Monaco

->Juventus FC Vs. Real Madrid

To be played on Wednesday, April 15, 2015, at 8:45 PM

->Paris Saint-Germain Vs. FC Barcelona

->FC Porto Vs. FC Bayern Munich

"Gentlemen," Emilia Vasquez spoke while the fixtures were still showing on the screens. "Let's start with Tuesday's fixture between Juventus and Real Madrid. The last time Juventus met Real Madrid in the Champions League knockout stages was a decade ago when the Old Lady overturned an away defeat to progress into the quarter-finals with a 2-1 aggregate win. They'll be looking to repeat the feat this year, only this tie has much more riding on it. A victory would ensure Juventus' progress to the semis, keeping their hopes of winning a treble or four trophies this season alive. What are your thoughts on this game?"

"Well, well, well!" Alessandro Costacurta said with a soft chuckle. "This is quite a difficult one to analyze."

The others in the studio laughed at that.

Alessandro Costacurta shook his head and continued, "Juventus has some of the greatest players in the world at that moment. There's Zachary Bemba, who nowadays plays football like an alien. There's also Andrea Pirlo, Carlos Tevez, Kingsley Coman, Claudio Marchisio, Arturo Vidal, Leonardo Bonucci, Giorgio Chiellini, Evra, Buffon, and Fernando Llorente."

"On the other hand, Real Madrid, of course, has the legendary Cristiano Ronaldo. His prestige precedes him, and we don't have to introduce him to the viewers." The pundit laughed. "Real also has Gareth Bale, Isco, Toni Kroos, Modric, Sergio Ramos, James Rodríguez, Marcelo, Pepe, Varane, Carvajal, and Casillas."

"Looking at these two teams, they each have their own strengths and weaknesses. Real Madrid are the reigning UEFA Champions League champions. They have the confidence of champions and plenty of attacking star quality in their squad. Players like Cristiano Ronaldo, Marcelo, Gareth Bale, Isco, and James Rodríguez are all dangerous when on the offensive. Their speed, individual brilliance, and tactical prowess allow them to flash forward and catch the opponent off guard within seconds. If Juventus players are not careful, they may suffer on the counter because of those few attacking players

"Moving on to Juventus," Alessandro Costacurta continued. "I believe they are a more solid and stronger team in midfield. Players like Zachary Bemba, Andrea Pirlo, Arturo Vidal, and Claudio Marchisio are all brilliant midfielders who can decide the game within seconds. If the opponent loses concentration for even a moment, an abrupt long-range defense-splitting pass from Pirlo or a sudden breakthrough run by Zachary will seal the deal. This is the prowess of Juventus."

"However, I believe that Juventus are still a bit lacking on the offensive front. Yes, they have forwards like Fernando Llorente and Carlos Tevez, who have scored a lot this season. But in my book, these two are still not at a level that can pose much of a threat to the seasoned Real Madrid defense. This is where the problem might occur for Juventus. They might dominate the game. However, even after hoarding all the possession, they might fail to score and seal the game. And if you fail to score against a team like Real Madrid, what follows is obvious."

"Hmm!" Joshua Morales, the other pundit, harrumphed. "Alessandro! Forgive me. But I'll have to disagree with your analysis."

Chapter 566 Speculations And Preparation For The Quarter-Final Against Real Madrid

All the cameras in the ESPN studios focused on Josua Morales after he made his interjection.

Emilia Vasquez, the sports show host, smiled. She looked at the pundit and said, "Joshua! Can you tell us why you disagree with Alessandro's analysis?"

"Well," Joshua Morales replied. "I'm not getting why Alessandro would speculate that a team with the current top scorer of the Champions League will find it hard to score goals. Time and time again this season, we have seen Juventus penetrate the defenses of robust defensive-minded teams. They put five goals past a team as tenacious as Atlético Madrid over the two legs during the Champions League group stages. Aside from that, they have averaged about three or more goals while playing other tough teams in Italy, including AC Milan, Inter Milan, and Napoli. They are a team that can score goals, and I'm sure they will do the same against Real Madrid."

"I'm not denying that Real Madrid is a strong team," Morales continued. "As a team, they have all the skills and world-class talents to go out and give Juventus hell during the game, offensive-wise. But we can't just discount Juventus as they have very creative offensive-minded players, like Zachary, Tevez, and Llorente, who have proven time and time again that they can rise to the occasion and do what is needed to win the game. They will score against Real Madrid, especially when they welcome them to the Juventus Stadium on Tuesday. The question will now be whether Real Madrid can score more goals than them over the two quarter-final legs."

Emilia Vasquez smiled and glanced at her iPad. "I have just been looking at the past statistics of the two teams. Juventus has not lost a single game since the beginning of this football season. They have only dropped points twice, that is when they drew against Atalanta and AS Roma in the Serie A. They have also won all their Coppa Italia and the Champions League games. They are, for sure, a team on form. Real Madrid, on the other hand, has lost several games. They lost against Barcelona just a few weeks back. They also lost against FC Schalke 04, Athletic Bilbao, Valencia, and Real Sociedad earlier in the season. And lastly, they have also suffered four defeats against Atlético Madrid this season. I have, of course, not mentioned the several times they drew against some of their opponents."

Joshua Morales laughed on hearing the statistics. "Going just by the recent performances, Real Madrid are undoubtedly the underdogs for these two legs of the UEFA Champions League quarter-finals. They will have to pray and hope that Juventus are not at the top of their game when they meet on the pitch."

"History doesn't determine everything," Alessandro chimed in. "With the star quality in their ranks, Real Madrid have a good chance of coming out on top after the two legs. In my honest opinion, I think they have a fifty percent chance of winning the quarter-finals."

"Gentlemen!" Charles Adams, the last pundit, chimed in. "Let's also not forget that Luka Modrić and Karim Benzema will likely miss the game due to knee problems. Aside from that, Gareth Bale is also just returning from injury. It isn't clear whether Ancelotti will ask him to go 90 minutes."

"This, indeed, could be a problem," Alessandro Costacurta said. "If both Benzema and Bale remain sidelined, then Real Madrid will find it difficult to finish off goal-scoring opportunities."

Joshua Morales also nodded.

"Charles!" Emilia Vasquez interjected to redirect the conversation. "What could be some key matchups to expect from this game?"

Charles Adams smiled. "We should expect to see plenty of wide battles during the game. Juventus' lack of wingers means they consistently shape up very narrow in attack, but that can leave them a little short-handed in the wing areas when they're out of possession. In this game, they'll have to work hard to ensure Stephan Lichtsteiner is given a helping hand when up against Cristiano Ronaldo. Midfield shuttlers Arturo Vidal and Claudio Marchisio must also ensure that full-backs Marcelo and Dani Carvajal aren't able to venture forward completely unguarded."

"Aside from the wide battle," Charles Adams continued, "we can also expect to see a phenomenal matchup in the midfield. Zachary Bamba and Andrea Pirlo, who have played incredibly well for Juventus this season, will be battling against Isco and Toni Kroos. The Real Madrid midfielders will have to go all out to stop Zachary's breakthrough runs through the middle. They will also have to remain alert against the defense-splitting passes from both Zachary and Pirlo, which can do damage when you least expect it. It's a pity that Modric is out with a knee injury. Otherwise, we would have witnessed a more intensive battle between these midfielders."

"Don't forget to mention the matchup between Cristiano Ronaldo and Juventus' center-backs," Alessandro Costacurta said. "Ronaldo always tends to cut into the pitch and make breakthrough runs into or behind the defensive line. Moreover, he has the skills to either take on the defenders and break into the box or shoot from a distance and do the damage. Leonardo Bonucci and Giorgio Chiellini, the two center-backs, will have to go all out to keep the superstar quiet in the final third."

"Indeed, that's a good point," Joshua Morales said. "That also points to a very crucial question. Will Coach Max Allegri go with the 4-3-1-2 or a 3-5-2 formation? We have seen him alternate between the two throughout the season so far. The 3-5-2 is probably a more negative approach due to its tendency to invite pressure. And if you invite pressure from Real Madrid, you all know what can happen."

Charles Adams nodded. "I think Max Allegri will play it safe and go with a 4-3-1-2 formation. He can field Evra, Chiellini, Bonucci, and Stephan Lichtsteiner in defense. Then, he can play Claudio Marchisio, Vidal, and Pirlo as the three holding midfielders while allowing Zachary to remain as the attacking midfielder. Then, he could complete his 4-3-1-2 set-up with the two strikers - Carlos Tevez and Fernando Llorente, who have shown time and time again that they can score when it matters this season."

The other pundits nodded, and the show continued. Emilia Vasquez, the host, eventually steered the discussion towards the other quarter-final fixtures of the UEFA Champions League, and all the pundits gave their careful analyses about them. Towards the end, they focused on analyzing Wednesday night's fixture between Paris Saint-Germain and FC Barcelona before saying their goodbyes to the viewers and ending the program.

The Juventus players only rested for a day after defeating Parma Calcio and winning the league early. Then, when Monday arrived, they returned to the Vinovo to prepare for Tuesday night's crucial quarter-final fixture against Real Madrid.

Coach Allegri was strict and meticulous that day. He personally took the players through the tactical drills and fitness conditioning routines during the morning hours. He ended the physical training at lunch to allow the players to rest their bodies, especially since the match was the following day.

The coach then let the players enjoy lunch and rest for about an hour before summoning them to the tactics room for a pre-game meeting. He immediately started explaining the tactics for the game against Real Madrid and eventually discussed all game aspects with his players. The coach clarified the opponent's weaknesses or strengths, the game plan, and individual roles for each field player before moving on to the squad and playing formations.

The line-up was pretty much what everyone expected. It comprised Juventus' best-performing players at the moment, including Gianluigi Buffon, Patrice Evra, Giorgio Chiellini, Leonardo Bonucci, Stephan Lichtsteiner, Claudio Marchisio, Arturo Vidal, Andrea Pirlo, Zachary Bemba, Carlos Tevez, and Kingsley Coman. The only first-stringer out of the starting squad was the off-form - Fernando Llorente, who had struggled to perform during the match against Parma. He would instead be a substitute along with the others like Andrea Barzagli, Álvaro Morata, Simone Padoin, Roberto Pereyra, and Simone Pepe.

After reading the squad, the coach looked at his players and said, "Tomorrow is the big day. It's the day we face off against Real Madrid at the Juventus stadium. We'll have a light training session in the

morning and rest in the afternoon. Then, at 6:30 in the evening, we'll all meet here again before heading to our home stadium to welcome Real Madrid to Turin."

"But let me also make a few things clear." The coach swept his gaze across all his players in the tactics room. "I don't want to see exhausted players before we play the game. So, eat healthy food and get ample rest tonight. Don't spend too much time getting intimate with your lovers to the point of failing to perform during the match."

The players laughed at that and whistled while a few others called out the names of their teammates.

"I guess I have said all I wanted to say," Coach Allegri continued. "Let's meet again tomorrow to make our final preparations for the game." The coach then added a few concluding remarks before sending the players to their homes for the day. He wanted them to rest early. That way, they would have the required energy levels to face off against the tricky Real Madrid side the following night.

Chapter 567 Champions League Quarter-Final Match Day

Tuesday, April 14, 2015

Time: 8:00 PM

Juventus Stadium, Turin, Italy.

Only forty-five minutes were remaining before the kick-off of the long-awaited UEFA Champions League quarter-final first-leg battle between Juventus and Real Madrid. The excitement was in the air, and over forty thousand football supporters had already entered the Juventus stadium.

At the moment, most fans were already singing and cheering while watching the players of both teams warming up on the pitch. Of course, there were also those few who had already taken their seats in the stands and were only discussing the upcoming game.

Paolo Favero, a staunch Juventus fan, looked at the pitch. He observed the Real Madrid players warming up before saying, "As expected, a few key players are missing from the Real Madrid squad. I don't see Luka Modric, Ángel Di María, and Karim Benzema. This is good for us."

"Yeah," Simone Rocchi, his friend sporting a black and white striped Juventus jersey, said. "From the news reports, they are all out injured. There were also reports that Gareth Bale was unfit before the game. Unfortunately, it seems he has already overcome his fitness issues. Aside from Cristiano Ronaldo, he'll be another dangerous attacking threat within Real Madrid's squad today."

Paolo Favero nodded and continued looking at the pitch. His eyes naturally took in the visages of all the famous Real Madrid superstars, including Cristiano Ronaldo, Gareth Bale, Isco, Iker Casillas, Pepe, Sergio Ramos, Marcelo, and James Rodríguez. At that moment, they were among the ranks of their teammates, going through their pre-game warm-up under the supervision of Carlo Ancelotti, their head coach.

"This is the biggest test for us in the Champions League this season so far," Paolo Favero eventually said. "Let's hope we come out on top."

"Have some confidence, my friend," Simone Rocchi reacted. "We have the best-performing squad in Europe this season. We haven't lost even a single game in all competitions. So, what's there to fear? As long as the players perform as usual, we'll win."

"I guess that makes sense." Paolo Favero smiled and turned towards Juventus' side of the pitch. His eyes naturally landed first on Zachary Bemba, Juventus' man of the moment. At that juncture, the twenty-year-old phenomenon was among the ranks of the other Juventus players. He was going through his warm-up under the supervision of Max Allegri, Juventus' head coach.

Paolo Favero could see that Zachary looked confident and energetic. The young-play maker went through the rapid jumping squat and heeltap step drills almost without breaking a sweat. For sure, he was a player who was ready to perform at this crucial juncture of the Champions League.

"Zachary looks sharp," Simone Rocchi commented after following his gaze. "I hope the pressure of facing legends like Cristiano Ronaldo for the first time doesn't affect him. We need him at the top of his game to defeat Real Madrid."

"Yeah," Paolo said. "Let's hope he will play as usual."

In the meantime, the Juventus players were in the final stages of their pre-game dynamic warm-up on their side of the field. They went through a few more stretches to loosen their muscles before getting the nod to conclude the session from Coach Max Allegri.

The players went to do their own warm-up routines after that. Buffon, of course, went with the goal-keeping coach for his other warm-up while the rest spread out on the pitch to perform various exercises.

Zachary, on his part, grouped up with Andre Pirlo, Patrice Evra, Carlos Tevez, Claudio Marchisio, and Arturo Vidal to have a feel of the ball by playing some light passes. They started playing something akin to a rondo but without a player in the middle.

"Your former teammate is quite a menace on the pitch," Claudio Marchisio suddenly said as they were halfway through the drill. He was, of course, referring to Cristiano Ronaldo and talking to Patrice Evra and Carlos Tevez. They were the two players on the scene that had played with the Portuguese ace at Manchester United.

"Yes, CR7 is something else on the pitch," Patrice Evra agreed. "He's one guy who will give you hell when you're his opponent. Lichtsteiner will have to remain on his toes in the right back position to prevent him from doing damage."

After hearing Evra's words, Zachary subconsciously peeked towards the other side of the pitch where the Real Madrid players were undergoing warm-ups. His eyes quickly picked out the all-familiar visage of Cristiano Ronaldo, who was seriously performing hip rotation drills under the supervision of one of the Real Madrid assistant coaches.

"What could his stats be like?" Such a thought flashed through Zachary's mind. He subconsciously held on to the ball a little longer and used the GOAT System's snooping tool to scan the Portuguese ace.

Footballer: Cristiano Ronaldo

Physical Fitness: SS

Soccer Technique: SS

Game Intelligence: SSS

Mental Ability and Mindset: SSS

X-Factor: SSS

Zachary gasped in shock after seeing CR7's stats on the system interface. The Portuguese ace had roughly the same physical fitness and soccer technique stats as his. They were all at the SS-grading, meaning that their various aspects, like Agility, Stamina, Endurance, Ball Control, Dribbling, Body Control, and Passing, were almost at the same level.

However, CR7 still possessed several advantages over Zachary. He had SSS-graded game intelligence, implying that his spatial awareness, tactical knowledge, and risk assessment attributes on the pitch were a grade higher than Zachary's. He also possessed SSS-graded Mental ability and X-factor, meaning his composure and luck aspects were much better than those of Zachary's.

It was important to note that a single difference in stats could mean a big difference in abilities, especially at the top level of professional football. For instance, CR7's SSS-graded game intelligence might seem like a difference of just one grade from Zachary's SS-ability. However, this contrast was, in essence, an enormous chasm that most players couldn't easily bridge while on the pitch.

That was because the higher your stats were, the harder it was to improve them. Even more so, the higher the attributes, the higher the difference in abilities between two individuals of two close grades.

With SSS-graded game intelligence, Ronaldo had all the tools to perform at his best and outshine the SS-graded players of the same attribute during every game. He could instantly make the best decisions on

the pitch and utilize his already-high physical fitness and techniques to crash opponents. His high-risk assessment and tactical knowledge could also allow him to assess the game situation quickly, even during critical moments. After that, he would easily use his other abnormal attributes to exploit the gaps and do damage before the opponent could react. This was an advantage possessed by all players with abnormally-high game intelligence.

Andrea Pirlo, Zachary's teammate, also had SSS-graded game intelligence. But the Italian Maestro was still not in the realms of the abnormal players as his physical stats, like agility and Stamina, were only around the S-grading. They were even a grade lower than Zachary's.

Ronaldo, on the other, possessed SS-graded physical fitness attributes along with his overly-high game intelligence, mental strength, and x-factor attributes. This was the difference between a once-in-a-generational talent and an exceptional player like Pirlo.

"Zachary, what's wrong?" Patrice Evra shouted to break Zachary out of his trance. "Is the pressure of facing Cristiano Ronaldo and Real Madrid getting to you? Hurry up and pass the ball."

Zachary chuckled and returned his attention to his teammates. He continued exchanging quick touches with them until he felt like his mind had achieved its usual tranquility before games. He had even pushed all the concerns regarding CR7's stats to the back of his mind, and the only thing on his mind was how best to ready himself for the game.

It was at that juncture that Coach Max Allegri glanced at his watch. "Warm-up time is over," he announced. "Quickly return to the dressing room for the final match preparations."

"Yes, coach!" Most players, including Zachary, responded and made a beeline for the tunnel.

At that point, the noise in the stadium had reached thunderous levels. Zachary could hear the familiar booming cheers of the more than twenty thousand Juventus supporters in attendance. They sang some of the Old Lady's popular chants and, at times, shouted some of the players' names as they watched them returning to the dressing room. Zachary could even vividly hear a group in the stands above the tunnel entrance chanting his name excitedly.

Zachary waved to the fans shouting his name as he immersed himself in the explosive atmosphere before the UEFA Champions League quarter-final. At the same time, he started registering the voices of the opposing supporters, who were singing the names of the Real Madrid players.

"Cristianooooo... Ronaldooooo..."

"Iker... Casillas..."

"Marceloooo..."

"Pepe..."

It was as if the traveling Real Madrid supporters were competing with Juventus' home fans on who could make more noise. They went all out to shout the names of the Real Madrid players, thus turning the atmosphere within the Juventus stadium more explosive and chaotic.

Zachary observed all the excitement and chaos as he headed toward the dressing room for the final game preparations. And right then, something finally registered in his mind.

He had finally progressed to a level where he could face a team like Real Madrid. He was at a career stage where he could finally play against once-in-a-generation talents like CR7 during a crucial UEFA Champions League quarter-final. It was his dream. But now that he had finally made it, he was at the same time excited and nervous.

"Do you feel the pressure? Are you a bit nervous?" A familiar voice asked from beside him as he was about to reach the tunnel entrance.

Zachary turned to the side and noticed that it was indeed Coach Allegri who had spoken. The coach had arrived beside him when he was still deep in his thoughts.

Zachary chose to be honest with the coach. "This is my first time playing at this stage," he replied in Italian. "I'm really feeling the pressure. I'm also a little bit nervous."

Coach Allegri smiled and said, "A little bit of pressure before the game will do you good. Hold on to that feeling and let it be the driving force that allows you to perform at your best during the game. But at the same time, don't let it overwhelm you. I'm looking forward to your performance tonight."

"Thanks, coach," Zachary replied. "I'll try my best. No, I'll do my best."

"Good." Coach Allegri nodded and patted Zachary's shoulder. He then quickened his pace and walked into the tunnel entrance.

Zachary slowed down and cast a last glance at the boisterous atmosphere within the stands of the Juventus stadium. He then followed after his teammates and coaches and stepped into the tunnel.

Yes, he was still a bit nervous. But he was also looking forward to finally playing Real Madrid. He yearned to prove himself as a great player. He wished to put up a memorable performance against one of the greatest teams in the world that night.

Chapter 568 Impressive Start

?

Time quickly flashed by, and soon, the kick-off time arrived. The players of both teams, who had just gotten their pre-match instructions from their respective coaches, walked out of the tunnel amid thunderous applause from their fans.

The Juventus players were in their black and white striped jerseys. Their team stars, like Zachary Bemba, Andrea Pirlo, Kingsley Coman, and Arturo Vidal, all looked suave in the get-up. They held the hands of young kids as they walked onto the pitch.

The Real Madrid players, on the other hand, had donned their all-black away jerseys that night. The eyes of their stars, like Sergio Ramos, Cristiano Ronaldo, and Pepe, were all shining with a dangerous glint. They didn't look like footballers heading onto the pitch for a game but scary warriors heading for mortal combat.

"The Real Madrid players look scary," Kristin Stein, who had already taken her seat in the Juventus stadium, commented. After obtaining free tickets from Zachary, she couldn't have missed the match.

She had concluded all her chores early and headed to the Juventus Stadium with Emily and a few other friends to watch the crucial first leg of the quarter-final between Juventus and Real Madrid.

"Real Madrid is a tough team. Moreover, some of their players, like Sergio Ramos and Pepe, play a rough game. Let's hope that Zachary doesn't become a victim of their dark arts," Emily said with some worry. She was seated beside Kristin. But even then, she had to shout to make herself heard due to the sheer noise in the stadium.

"You don't need to worry," Kristin consoled. "Zachary is a player who understands the art of protecting himself on the pitch. In fact, if the opponents dare to play roughly against him, he will most likely come out on top. I won't be surprised if he manages to win himself a few free-kicks within the final third. If the conditions are right, he might even go a step further and force a red card."

"That makes sense," Emily agreed. "Let's hope that everything progresses as you have predicted."

Kristin nodded and turned her attention to the pitch. The singing of the UEFA Champions League anthem had just ended, and the players were going through the customary pre-match handshake.

Everything proceeded smoothly, and the rest of the pre-game routines, including the coin toss, ended in less than two minutes. In the meantime, most players headed to their respective sides of the pitch and took their starting positions.

However, the observant Kristin immediately noticed that some Real Madrid players, like Cristiano Ronaldo, James Rodríguez, Pepe, Sergio Ramos, and Toni Kroos, were still huddled together close to the center circle. They seemed to be making some last-minute strategizing before the kick-off.

As suspected by Kristin, the few Real Madrid players were, indeed, having a last-minute strategy meeting. James Rodríguez looked at Sergio Ramos and asked solemnly, "Ramos! Do you still remember what the coach said?"

"Of course I do," Sergio answered with a dismissive wave of his hand. "Isn't it just to play holding midfield and stop Zachary's penetrative runs? You don't need to worry. I'll manage."

Pepe smiled a bit derisively and patted Ramos' shoulder. "My friend! Zachary's conversion rate for set pieces is at an insane level. Remember not to go in wholesale when marking him. Don't gift him unnecessary free-kicks in the final third."

Sergio Ramos chuckled. "Look at who's talking. Is there any other player who concedes more fouls than you, Pepe? You better watch out. Don't make reckless tackles in the box or final third."

"Guys, stop fooling around," Cristiano Ronaldo reminded with his signature accent. "The match is about to start. Ramos! Just take Pepe's advice. Avoid going in wholesale when marking Zachary. It will be enough to block and delay him for a second or two, as that will allow Kroos to cover you."

"I will do that," Ramos said, nodding. "Don't worry."

"Good," Cristiano Ronaldo said. "Let's not overthink things at this last moment. We only have to go on the field and perform as usual. If we do that, we'll score goals and win the game."

"True," Pepe said. "Let's just play our best game. Let's show these Juventus players who's boss."

The others nodded and immediately ran off to take their positions.

The clocks around Turin had just pointed to the 8:45 PM mark. Martin Atkinson, the referee, immediately blew the whistle, and the game commenced with Juventus' kick-off.

Carlos Tevez, one of the two Juventus strikers for the day, immediately played the ball back to find Andrea Pirlo in midfield.

The Italian Maestro, on his part, took a touch before threading a pass to Claudio Marchisio, one of the three holding midfielders of Juventus. And with that, the game settled into a steady rhythm as the Juventus players started playing their signature slow buildup passes.

In the meantime, Coach Allegri was busy on the sidelines. He was analyzing Real Madrid's tactics for the game while trying to adjust his own game plan accordingly.

Coach Allegri readily identified that the ingenious and tactically-flexible Carlo Ancelotti had gone with a 4-4-2 double-6 formation to cover the absence of the injured Modric and Karim Benzema duo.

The Real Madrid head coach had played Marcelo, Pepe, Varane, and Daniel Carvajal as the four defenders. He had then fielded Sergio Ramos and Toni Kroos as double pivots or holding midfielders while allowing Isco and James Rodríguez to play wide midfield roles. Lastly, he played Cristiano Ronaldo and Gareth Bale as the two strikers to complete his 4-4-2 double-pivot formation.

With his experience, Coach Allegri could see through Carlo Ancelotti's intent at just a glance. The Italian tactician had obviously fielded Sergio Ramos and Toni Kroos as the two defensive midfielders to prevent Zachary's penetrative runs through the middle. The Real Madrid manager had also played Isco and James Rodríguez out wide to allow them to exploit Juventus' lack of wingers.

Coach Allegri studied the opponent's game plan without any change of expression. He had expected all the tactics employed by Real Madrid and put appropriate measures to combat them.

His only prayer was for his players, especially Zachary and Pirlo, to follow his instructions. The rest would be straightforward, and his team would likely gain an advantage sooner rather than later.

On the pitch, five minutes of gameplay went quietly by.

Juventus had started the game strongly, and by relying on excellent midfielders like Pirlo, Marchisio, Vidal, and Zachary, they had taken control from the opening minutes. They were dictating the tempo and hoarding about 60% of the possession while patiently waiting to penetrate Real Madrid's defensive set-up.

The 7th minute arrived, and the ball 'naturally' made its way to the border of the defensive third. It reached Andrea Pirlo's feet, who had suddenly drifted back into defensive midfield to collect it.

At that exact moment, something else happened. Zachary, who had constantly been in battle against Sergio Ramos close to the border of the final third, immediately made eye contact with the Italian Maestro. Then, without bothering to identify whether Pirlo had gotten his message, he escaped Sergio Ramos' harassment and floated toward the left wing.

It was at that point that the high game intelligence of Andrea Pirlo came into play. He had already spotted Zachary making the abrupt run to overload the left wing. Moreover, it was also a move they had practiced several times during training. So, without delay, the Maestro worked his magic. He sent a long-range pass over the midfield and toward Zachary's sprinting path along the left flank.

Zachary, on his part, arrived close to the touchline on the left flank when the pass from Pirlo was about to reach. He stretched out his boot and effortlessly controlled the ball before taking off like a bullet train on the rails toward the other side of the pitch.

Since Pirlo's long-range pass had been too abrupt, it had taken most Real Madrid players out of the equation. As such, Zachary had all the yards of space to utilize on the left flank. He ran like the wind, his long strides eating up yards of space, until he came across the first roadblock in the form of Daniel Carvajal, Madrid's right-back for the day.

Zachary remained composed. His SS-grade agility came into play, and he immediately executed an 'elastico dribble' to draw in the approaching defender. He followed that up with a few step-overs before leaning towards the right, just as if he was about to break through from that direction and cut into the pitch.

As expected, Daniel Carvajal reacted like a typical seasoned defender. He moved in the same direction, hoping to prevent Zachary from cutting into the pitch and threatening his goal.

The gears in Zachary's mind turned and fell into place within a split second when he noticed Daniel Carvajal's reaction.

His SS-grade Balance and Coordination came into play, and he suddenly stopped midmotion. He abruptly altered his center of gravity and aligned his body towards the left side. Then, just as suddenly, he fed the ball past the defender and exploded with pace, driving along the touchline like a rich kid who had just 'borrowed' his dad's Lamborghini.

His SS-grade stamina worked wonders, and he maintained his top speed until he started cutting into the pitch. He soon skipped past a sliding tackle from Toni Kroos and approached the edge of the box from the left flank.

At that point, the Real Madrid defenders had already fallen in place to block his run. Rapha?l Varane and Pepe, the Real Madrid center-backs, were the most problematic and had covered all his shooting angles and possible breakthrough routes into the box. There was also Sergio Ramos, who was rushing at him as if intent on committing murder.

Zachary remained composed despite the circumstances. His spatial awareness worked like a charm, and he spotted Andrea Pirlo arriving at the edge of the box. Without hesitation, he unleashed an abrupt minus, subtracting all the players crowding around the area and setting up Pirlo for a direct shot on goal.

Andrea Pirlo was as razor-sharp as ever. He met Zachary's first-time pass with a blast and sent a powerful ball goalward. His shooting technique was what one could call deific, and his powerful shot zoomed in between the legs of the players in the box, heading towards the goal like a bullet fired from a sniper rifle.

The tension rose to unbelievable levels as all eyes in the stadium looked towards Real Madrid's goal, wondering what would happen next. It was at that point that a gloved hand silently appeared. It was Iker Casillas, the legendary Spanish keeper, taking action. He dived in at the right time to save the day by punching the ball away from his goal and back into the box.

"Damn..." Zachary started the action of placing his hands behind his head, thinking that his team had wasted an opportunity. But halfway through the motion, he stopped as he noticed that a silhouette in Juventus' black and white jersey had pounced on the rebounded ball.

Zachary's hopes soared as he realized that the Juventus man in action was Carlos Tevez. The Argentine striker was like a fox in the box, and he beat all the other players to the ball before hammering it goalward.

Tevez smashed the ball with zeal and power, sending it into the back of the net to score Juventus' 1st goal during the 9th minute. Not even the legendary Iker Casillas could save the situation due to the momentum behind the shot.

"GOAAAAL..."

Carlos Tevez yelled like a madman and raced towards the touchline. He slid on his knees for a few meters before jumping up and punching the air several times.

His intense celebration showed he was in high spirits after scoring Juventus' 1st goal in a crucial UEFA Champions League quarter-final against Real Madrid.

Seconds later, the other Juventus players, including Zachary, arrived and celebrated with him. They yelled like there was no tomorrow in front of their home fans. They obviously couldn't contain their happiness after taking the first solid step towards winning the quarter-final against Real Madrid.

Chapter 569 Masters of Counterattacking Football

Juventus FC 1: Real Madrid 0

It was as if vocal explosions were going off all around the Juventus stadium after Carlos Tevez scored the first goal of the 2015 UEFA Champions League quarter-final. The more than twenty thousand Juventus fans jumped from their seats and yelled like mad. Their chaotic chorus of voices instantly hit a crescendo that shook the entire place to the very core.

"Juventus has drawn first blood through Carlos Tevez," Sandro Piccinini, the commentator for the day, said after the cheers started fading. "Everything started with a well-timed progress of play that could have as well been taken out of a typical coaching tactical book."

"Andrea Pirlo drifted back towards his goal and received the ball close to the border of his defensive third. He then used his incredible passing range to pick out Zachary Bemba, who had just sailed out of midfield to overload the right wing."

"Everything was straightforward from there on. Zachary did what he usually does best. He used his incredible ball skills and agility to beat Daniel Carvajal and skip past a sliding tackle from Toni Kroos. He approached the box from the left side and brilliantly played a ball back towards the middle to find the arriving Andrea Pirlo."

"The experienced Andrea Pirlo didn't disappoint. He effortlessly found the target with a first-time shot. Iker Casillas got a glove on the ball and denied the Italian Maestro's effort. But that wasn't enough to stop Juventus from capitalizing on the opportunity. Tevez was in a perfect position and reacted to meet the rebound and score Juventus' 1st goal during the 9th minute. What a brilliant passage of play! What a brilliant Juventus!"

"Indeed, what a brilliant Juventus," Carlo Zampa, the other commentator, agreed. "But I have to say that Real Madrid have brought problems upon themselves. They are playing a 4-4-2 double-pivot formation with two holding midfielders and two wide advanced midfielders."

"Yes, such a setup has made it hard for Juventus' attacking players to penetrate the heart of Real Madrid's defense through the middle. But at the same time, it has allowed Juventus plenty of freedom to conquer the central midfield and dictate the tempo. The result is the goal we have just witnessed."

"True," Sandro Piccinini said. "The game has just restarted. Despite conceding the goal, Real Madrid still uses the same system. Sergio Ramos and Toni Kroos are playing as defensive midfielders, while Isco and James Rodríguez are the advanced wide midfielders. I don't know what Coach Carlo Ancelotti is planning. But from what I can see, his tactics are plainly handing Juventus control of the game. This will continue causing his team more trouble."

"And who gave Ancelotti the idea to use Sergio Ramos as a defensive midfielder?" Carlo Zampa, the other commentator, questioned. "No disrespect to Ramos. He's an incredible defensive player. But we have to understand that he's not a midfielder."

"In this game, his up against incredible midfielders like Zachary Bemba, Andrea Pirlo, Claudio Marchisio, and Arturo Vidal. They are leading poor Ramos by the nose and dictating the tempo. Take the goal Real Madrid conceded as an example. One abrupt run from Zachary was enough to shake him off and leave him confused. Following that, the young playmaker got the freedom to drift into the wing and hurt Real Madrid. The rest we all know, and the result is Juventus' 1st goal for the night."

Sandro Piccinini chuckled. "I don't want to blame Sergio alone. The rest of the Real Madrid midfielders are also not doing enough. They have not played any crucial forward passes. As a result, Gareth Bale and Cristiano Ronaldo (their two strikers) have barely gotten touches on the ball during the opening ten minutes."

"The game is still in its early stages," Carlo Zampa remarked. "Maybe, Real Madrid will eventually settle and up their game. Hope it won't be too late for them."

"Who cares?" Sandro Piccinini chuckled again. "The Juventus fans in this stadium should be pleased with Real Madrid's performance. Most must be hoping that Real Madrid continues playing below-par football."

Carlo Zampa also chuckled and continued commentating on the progress of the play.

The game continued as the commentators discussed. Juventus still dominated the proceedings by relying on their supreme number of brilliant midfielders. Passes flowed like spring water from one Juventus player to another, allowing the team from Turin to dominate possession.

In that manner, ten more minutes quietly passed, and the 25th minute arrived. Zachary once again executed a sudden dash to escape the entanglement of Sergio Ramos. He raced from the attacking midfield zone and drifted back to the defensive third.

It was a move that the team had practiced on the training field several times. As such, everything that followed was smooth and natural.

Patrice Evra, the left wing-back, immediately reacted. He skipped past James Rodríguez, Real Madrid's right midfielder, and squared the ball to Zachary, who had just arrived at the border of the defensive third.

Zachary's reaction was lightning-fast. He effortlessly controlled the ball and spun around to execute a Marseille turn. His SS-graded coordination, agility, and dribbling all came into play, and he skipped past Isco, one of Real Madrid's advanced midfielders, before reorienting himself and facing the other side of the pitch.

The next moment, his eyes glowed with resolve as he realized he had a few dozen yards of space to work with. Adrenaline rapidly pumped into his system, and he raced towards the other side of the pitch like a lightning bolt.

As Zachary initiated the run from deep midfield, the rest of the Juventus players reacted as they had practiced in training. The wing-backs Patrice Evra and Stephan Lichtsteiner raced along the touchlines, shooting towards Real Madrid's half like speeding electric trains. Aside from them, Carlos Tevez, Kingsley Coman, Claudio Marchisio, and Andrea Pirlo also made strategic runs through the middle to penetrate the heart of Real Madrid's defense.

At that juncture, the Juventus players were like a wolf pack that had caught the scent of the most delicious prey. They all swarmed forward together with Zachary, hoping to do more damage to their opponents.

In the meantime, Zachary had just met an obstacle in the form of Sergio Ramos as he went past the centerline. But he didn't choose to tango with the guy since he knew that the Spaniard was a master of defensive dark arts. Instead, Zachary played a one-two with Claudio Marchisio to go past Ramos before continuing his run.

Sergio Ramos, of course, reacted as the typical Ramos. He spun around, intending to pull Zachary's shirt and stop his run toward his box. But alas, his efforts were fruitless.

Zachary was too fast for the Real Madrid player. He increased his speed to the max within a few strides and escaped the reach of Ramos. He continued darting through the middle and rushing toward Real Madrid's box like a whirlwind until he came across a blockade by Toni Kroos.

At that moment, Zachary's SS-graded passing skills worked like a charm. Choosing not to take on the German midfielder, he reacted instantaneously. He released the ball to Andrea Pirlo, the Italian Maestro, who had positioned himself within a strategic unmarked pocket of space close to the left side of the box.

Andrea Pirlo was as tactically brilliant as ever. He took one touch before unleashing a seemingly uncomplicated but teasing cross towards the box. His passing accuracy was world-class, and he picked out Kingsley Coman from the crowd of players in the box.

Chance!

A momentary silence descended upon the stadium as Kingsley Coman reacted to meet the ball. The Frenchman leaped up from the ground and outmuscled his fellow countryman Raphaël Varane in the air. Without fear, he angled his body well and planted a header goalward.

An anxious atmosphere fell upon the stadium. All eyes and cameras were on the ball from Kingsley as it quickly darted towards the goal. Kingsley, himself, had also turned to follow the trajectory of his effort. Time seemed to have slowed as he anticipated the moment the ball would nestle into the back of the net.

But the unexpected happened, and two gloved hands abruptly appeared at the last moment. Iker Casillas, the Real Madrid keeper, had taken action. He bravely executed a full-body dive and snatched the ball out of the air with his two hands. And with that, he managed to prevent Real Madrid from conceding the second goal during the 26th minute.

However, the Real Madrid keeper didn't just stop at making the save. Casillas rose from the ground with all the urgency he could muster. And before Zachary and his teammates could react, the Spaniard rushed toward the edge of the box and unleashed a long-range one-handed throw toward the left flank.

"Counterattack!" Coach Allegri's yell sounded from the sidelines. "Fall back! Quick!"

"Shit..." Zachary cursed, fearing the worst. He turned in time to see Marcelo, Real Madrid's left-back, receiving the ball close to the touchline on the left flank. Zachary immediately raced back towards his half. But deep in his heart, he knew he was late.

The counterattack proceeded as Zachary had expected, and Marcelo drove the ball like a speeding Ferrari through the left wing. Arturo Vidal, the Juventus midfielder who had stayed back, tried to stop him. However, the Brazilian played it safe and released the ball toward the middle to find Gareth Bale before the opponent could close him down.

Gareth Bale, on his part, reacted as the typical Bale. He collected the ball midstride before running at Leonardo Bonucci and Giorgio Chiellini, the two Juventus center-backs. He continued darting forward and inching closer to the defenders until the very last moment when he unleashed a well-timed pass toward his right to find James Rodríguez.

The pass from Bale was just precise, and it released Rodríguez at the right moment before he became offside. Rodríguez took a touch and raced forward before finding himself with only the keeper to beat.

Gianluigi Buffon, Juventus' experienced keeper, responded as he should. He raced out of goal, hoping to corner Rodríguez and deny him time to compose himself. Moreover, he made himself big to close down most of the shooting angles available to the opponent.

But alas, James Rodríguez seemed to have anticipated Buffon's reaction and didn't take a shot at the goal. Instead, he unleashed a simple chip over the keeper towards the far post, where Cristiano Ronaldo was arriving.

Cristiano Ronaldo's response in front of the goal was textbook perfect. He met the chip from Rodríguez and headed into the empty net. He completed the lightning-fast counterattack and scored Real Madrid's 1st goal for the night during the 26th minute. And with that, the proceedings were back to level terms.

Chapter 570 The Prepared Casillas

"It's Juventus one and Real Madrid one," Sandro Piccinini, the commentator, yelled at the top of his voice. "A well-executed counterattack ending with a Cristiano Ronaldo finish has allowed the Madrid-based side to bring proceedings back to square one. Now, this is the Real Madrid that I know. If they get a chance, they will make it count."

Carlo Zampa, the other commentator, chuckled. "We've been mentioning how Juventus has dominated the game and dictated the tempo since the first minute. Their teamwork has been brilliant, and they have created a few good chances against Real Madrid during the first 25 minutes. They clearly seemed like the favorites to win the UEFA Champions League quarter-final."

"But what do we have on our hands now? With one counter, with the first clear chance, everything has changed. Real Madrid have overturned the status quo, and gotten the crucial away goal that has clearly put them in a very advantageous position to win the quarter-final."

Sandro Piccinini nodded. "I just think the Juventus players lost their focus before that goal. Most players flashed forward to attack and forgot their defensive duties while facing a team with fast and technically gifted attack-minded players like Cristiano Ronaldo, Gareth Bale, Marcelo, and James Rodriguez. In my book, this is a typical way of courting death. The result is the counterattack and the goal we've just seen."

The game restarted after the goal celebrations. The Juventus players learned their lesson from conceding the equalizer and stopped committing numbers forward. They seemed happy to allow the Madrid-based team more territory and were content to soak up the pressure while waiting for opportunities to form counterattacks.

The Real Madrid players, on the other hand, sprung to life after scoring the equalizer. Their midfielders, like Toni Kroos, Isco, and James Rodríguez, all upped their game and started playing brilliant football. Their pass completion rate grew to incredible levels until they were constantly asking all the crucial questions on the field of play.

The game continued as more minutes flashed by quickly. Madrid's growing presence in the game eventually manifested into a clear goal-scoring chance during the 43rd minute. Cristiano Ronaldo was the man in action, and he drove through the left wing and cut into the pitch after connecting with a through pass from Toni Kroos.

Ronaldo then exchanged a couple of precise and quick one-twos with Gareth Bale to get past Stephan Lichtsteiner, Juventus' right-back. He approached the box from the left side before unleashing a pinpoint cross towards the far post, where James Rodríguez was arriving.

James Rodríguez stormed forward in the box like a panther going in for a kill. He raced past Giorgio Chiellini before pushing off the ground and meeting the ball from Ronaldo with a first-time diving header. He sent the ball goalward, hoping to score Real Madrid's second goal during the 43rd minute.

Fortunately, luck seemed to elude Real Madrid, and the header smashed against the crossbar the next moment. The Juventus fans in the stands behind the goal let out sighs of relief as the ball bounced back into the box without doing any damage. But they didn't take their eyes off the field as the game dynamics continued changing.

This was especially so since Patrice Evra had just collected the rebounded ball within Juventus' box. The left-back worked with all the haste he could muster and kicked it toward Andrea Pirlo, who had just positioned himself in a strategic pocket of space at the border of the defensive third.

Andrea Pirlo, on his part, also reacted faster than ever. He took just a single touch on the ball before hammering it to Carlos Tevez, who had just drifted into the right wing.

Juventus' counterattack was on, and the 'on-form' Tevez worked his magic. He exploited the space left by Marcelo, the Madrid left-back who had just been on the attack. He cut through the right flank uncontested before stepping into the final third and eventually cutting into the pitch to head towards the box.

Pepe, one of Real Madrid's center-backs, came forward to stop Juventus' counter. However, Tevez didn't wait for the defender to close him down. He instead played a square pass into the middle to find Kingsley Coman, who had just arrived at the edge of the box.

Kingsley Coman didn't lose composure as he controlled the ball. He outwitted Raphaël Varane, the Madrid center-back, and effortlessly played a back-heel pass towards Zachary, who was also quickly approaching the box.

Zachary was in a highly focused state as he connected with the ingenious pass from Kingsley just a few meters away from the box. He collected the ball midstride and bounded forward. He hoped to quickly open up the angle to pass or to take a shot at the goal.

But right then, he felt a strong tug on his shirt that halted all his plans. He loosened his gait and allowed the offender to pull him back. And as expected, he felt himself tumbling to the ground within seconds.

"FOUL..." Most of the Juventus fans and players in the stadium yelled, more or less in unison.

Martin Atkinson, the referee, didn't need the reminder, though. He blew the whistle and quickly arrived at the scene. Without fear or favor, he awarded the free-kick just a few meters from the box before showing a yellow card to Sergio Ramos, the Real Madrid player who had committed the foul.

"Phew..."

Zachary breathed a sigh of relief and rose from the ground. He ignored the Real Madrid players crowding around the ref to argue their case and picked up the ball. He then walked to the side and patiently waited for the situation on the pitch to calm down.

Kingsley Coman and Carlos Tevez suddenly approached Zachary.

Zachary smiled and nodded at the two players.

"Do you need our help?" Tevez asked after taking a position beside Zachary.

Zachary shook his head. "I'll just go for the goal as usual. However, as you know, Iker Casillas can sometimes turn into a miracle worker between the posts. Just be ready to tap the rebound into the back of the net if, by some chance, he saves my free-kick.

"Noted," Both Tevez and Kingsley replied.

Right then, a few other Juventus players, like Pirlo, Claudio Marchisio, and Patrice Evra, started crowding around Zachary. They all encouraged him to relax and act as usual without any pressure. After that, they walked into Real Madrid's box to perform their own roles during the taking of the free-kick.

A minute passed, and the 45th minute arrived. The referee finished organizing the defensive wall and the other players in the box before taking a strategic position at the side. He then blew the whistle and motioned for Zachary to take the free-kick.

Iker Casillas, Real Madrid's keeper, had watched plenty of Zachary's past performances in preparation for the game. He had learned that the young playmaker could use both feet well when working with the ball. But when it mattered, like while taking free kicks, he would pull the trigger with his more powerful left leg nine out of ten times.

Through his pre-game research, Casillas also discovered another habit of Zachary. The guy always liked to send free-kicks over the wall before finding the furthest top corner away from the keeper's position.

For instance, if the keeper positioned himself to the right between the posts, Zachary would target the top left corner with uncanny accuracy. This was how the guy had outwitted many keepers and built up a highly abnormal set-piece conversion rate.

However, Casillas had prepared for all this trickery. He had organized the defensive wall toward the right side of the goal. He had also positioned himself slightly towards the left in-between the posts to bait Zachary into sending the ball over the wall and targeting the top right corner.

Everything would be easy as Casillas knew where the ball would be arriving. All he had to do was to use his world-class incredible reactions to dive toward the right before saving the day.

Casillas waited with bated breath as Zachary took a few steps back from the ball. He raised his concentration to the max, making sure to study and analyze each of the free-kick taker's actions.

A few more seconds passed, and he finally saw Zachary approach the ball from an angle. Casillas got ready to dive as the young dead ball specialist reached the last moment and initiated the motions to unleash a shot toward the goal.

The next moment, Casillas' sharp eyes saw Zachary's left boot swing down and connect with the stationary ball. In his highly focused state, time seemed to slow down, and he started orienting his body, preparing to dive toward the top right corner.

But just then, his mind suddenly froze and caught ice. He blanked out as he noticed a flash of motion zooming under the feet of one of the defenders in the wall, who had just jumped.

"Shit! A carpet shot!" Casillas let out an inward curse.

He quickly tried to adjust his body, desiring to do his best to save the day. But everything had happened so fast, and the shot from Zachary was already darting toward the goal like a lightning bolt. It flashed past his left, barely skimming over the grass and giving him no time to react.

All his preparations became null and void. And all he could do was turn his head and watch the ball home into the bottom left corner.

Juventus FC 2: Real Madrid 1

The cheers exploded in the Juventus stadium as the home fans celebrated their team's second goal right before halftime. In the meantime, Zachary allowed his mind to soak into the joy of scoring his team's second goal as he raced towards the corner flag to celebrate.