

Greatest 601

Chapter 601 End of the Italian Serie A Season

Zachary was brimming with happiness after the game ended. A soft smile lit up his facial features as he watched his teammates celebrate the win against Verona.

Juventus had finally concluded all 38 matches of the Serie A season without ever suffering a defeat. As such, he had completed the system mission milestone to help his teammates achieve an unbeaten run throughout the 2014-15 Serie A season and secured himself yet another potent S-grade vitality-enhancing elixir.

Aside from that, his thirteen assists during the season also allowed him to remain at the top of the assist leaderboard. Even though he didn't play Juventus' last two fixtures, he was still ahead of the other Serie A's most creative players, including Marek Hamšík and Paulo Dybala, who had eleven assists that season.

For that one reason, he had also completed the 3rd milestone of the 2014-15 Serie A challenge and won himself more Juju points. Adding on the ones he had secured after Juventus won the title seven days prior, he had raked in a total of 64,000, plus 20,000 bonus Juju points after completing six of the seven milestones of the mission.

The only imperfection in his mission completion rate was that he had only scored 35 goals in the Serie A. As such, he didn't meet the mission requirement to bag 40 goals and thus missed out on the handsome reward of 100,000 Juju points.

Zachary had long become aware that the usefulness of system perks like Juju points and even the skills mastering functions towards him were diminishing as his skills approached the SSS grade. But he still wished to collect the rewards and upgrade the system. He yearned to see whether it would eventually produce an elixir reward above the S grade that would make his abilities almost inhuman.

"Why are you spacing out here?" Patrice Evra's voice sounded beside him. "Why not come into the pitch and celebrate the final day of the Serie A season with your teammates?"

"Sure," Zachary grinned and agreed. His calf contusion had already mostly healed after undergoing the best of the best rehabilitation sessions at the J|Medical. He walked without discomfort and followed Evra onto the pitch.

Before long, he started hugging the teammates and coaches he chanced upon. He congratulated them upon concluding the season without facing any defeat. In turn, they replied with warm words, which included compliments about his winning the Golden Boot and Serie A Player-of-the-Season award.

Zachary didn't stop at just hugging his teammates but eventually approached the stands where the excited Juventus supporters were seated. He waved at them, and they replied excitedly and yelled his name as if there was no tomorrow.

The fans closest to the pitch even started asking for his autograph. But he politely ignored them before turning around and heading towards Coach Max Allegri.

"Zachary! It's nice to see you walking without crutches again," Coach Max Allegri smiled and hugged him. "We didn't get an opportunity to talk before the game. I hope you're recovering well."

"I am," Zachary assured the coach. "The doctors have already cleared me from using crutches. But they warned me against kicking the ball before Tuesday, June 2nd."

"That's reasonable," Coach Max Allegri said with a nod. "A contusion usually requires two weeks to heal. You should count your blessings since you will only take twelve days to recover. That aside, I hope you have been studying past Barcelona games during your injury spell."

"I have," Zachary said. "I have watched many of their recent matches, including their two semi-final legs against Bayern Munich. Their tiki-taka style, combined with the individual brilliance their attackers and midfielders command, is something else. We must play our best football to beat them during the UEFA Champions League finals."

"That's true, but they must also be at their best to beat us," Coach Max Allegri said with a chuckle.

"Many eyes are watching, so let's not discuss sensitive issues like the Champions League now. We'll talk more when you come for training on Tuesday."

"Okay," Zachary said. He then exchanged some more small talk with the coach and a few other teammates before heading back to the dressing room with them. The whole team planned to clean up quickly before taking their bus back to Turin that very night.

The following day was a Sunday. As always, Emilia Vasquez's ESPN Sunday morning sports show commenced at 11:00 AM, with her introducing Alessandro Costacurta, Joshua Morales, and Charles Adams, the three pundits to the viewers.

She then made a few jokes before smiling at the cameras and saying, "Our dear viewers! Yesterday was the final match day of the 2014-15 Serie A season. We all witnessed the performances of the various big names in Italy, with the highlight being Juventus having to push through a stormy evening at Verona's home ground to extend their unbeaten run with a 2:2 score."

"The Old Lady players were shaky on the night. But they still managed a draw against Hellas Verona and pushed their season tally to a record 106 points. That also implies that they completed the Serie A season without ever facing a defeat and also extended their unbeaten run in all competitions to 65 games. They have set a new record in Europe.

"They surely have," Alessandro Costacurta, one of the pundits, agreed. "As we said before, Bayern Munich was previously the team with the longest unbeaten run after they played 58 games without facing a defeat from 1991 to 1993. As of now, Juventus has long smashed this record with their own 65-game-long unbeaten record. Moreover, they are in a good position to extend it to 66 games unbeaten after the Champions League final scheduled for next weekend."

Emilia Vasquez smiled and asked, "Do you think they can win? Can they beat Barcelona in the UEFA Champions League final next weekend? Let's not forget that they last won the competition in 1996. Can they finally put smiles on the faces of their fans by bringing that glorious European Trophy back to Turin?"

"That's a hard question," Alessandro Costacurta replied. "Barcelona and Juventus are all great European teams that have performed brilliantly all season long. I don't have to say much about Juventus with all their feats, including three domestic trophies and an incredible unbeaten run. If they can get Zachary Bamba back to full fitness before the final, they could win the UEFA Champions League trophy."

"Nonetheless, we also can't count out Barcelona, the Catalans, from the final. Yes, they have had it rough a few times and suffered some defeats here and there. But they are a team with an incredible Tiki-taka playing style made possible by all the brilliant stars on their starting line-up."

"Their world-class attack-minded players like Andrés Iniesta, Neymar, Luis Suárez, and Lionel Messi can make the impossible happen. Their presence is why Barcelona has already won this season's La Liga and Copa del Rey. I won't be surprised if they perform incredibly well and destroy Juventus during the final."

"You talked about a crucial point of Juventus having to get Zachary back to full fitness before the final," Emilia Vasquez chipped in. "News out of the Juventus camp is that he's recovering well from the calf contusion, and he will likely make it in time for the final in six days. We also saw him walking comfortably around the pitch after Juventus's match against Verona yesterday. But even if he recovers, there's another issue for Juventus to consider. Will the injury affect his form in any way?"

"That is indeed an important point," Charles Adams, the other pundit, replied. "We all know that injuries in sports are not just a physical issue. Excluding the obvious matter of affecting the athlete's fitness, they can also bring about mental challenges like the fear of reinjury and a drop in confidence levels. Aside from regaining fitness, Zachary must overcome all these within the next six days if he wishes to play at his best during the final."

"I agree that all that Charles said is true," Joshua Morales, the last pundit, remarked. "But let's all not forget that Zachary Bemba is an incredibly talented player who has achieved so much during his debut season at Juventus. He should possess the mental fortitude to overcome all those issues before playing the final. Moreover, Zachary's half-best might still be among the top performances during any football match. Even if he's not fully match-fit, he will still impact the final."

"If we're to look at both teams objectively, Juventus is still the underdog for the final," Charles Adams said. "They already have two crucial players who might not be fully fit for the game against Barcelona. Let's put aside Zachary's injury concerns for a moment. But I still haven't heard any news about Andrea Pirlo's recovery from the Juventus camp. I'm not certain, but he could also miss the final."

"Then, let's look at Barcelona," he continued. "All their crucial players, including Dani Alves, Gerard Piqué, Ivan Rakitić, Sergio Busquets, Andrés Iniesta, Lionel Messi, Luis Suárez, and Neymar, are all fully fit and available for selection. I can't guess how the final will end. But I'm sure all those world-class players, especially Messi, Iniesta, and Neymar, will be a nightmare for Juventus during the game."

"I think that's enough about the Champions League final," Emilia Vasquez, the presenter, hurriedly said before the debate could continue. "We'll delve into more discussions about the UEFA Champions League final again on our Wednesday night show. But for now, let's return our focus to the just concluded Serie A season."

The three pundits smiled and nodded. They then started discussing the season performances of the other Italian teams until the show ended after an hour.

Chapter 602 The Eve of the Champions League Final

After gaining approval from the doctors, Zachary finally returned to the Vinovo to recommence his training early morning on Tuesday, June 2nd. His teammates welcomed him with warmth and enthusiasm when he stepped on the training ground, making him feel like he had never been absent. He responded with warm words before heading to the sidelines where the coaches were standing.

"Zachary!" Coach Max Allegri called out to him. "Welcome back. I hope you're now fully recovered."

"Thanks, coach," Zachary replied in fluent Italian. "Of course, I'm back to full fitness already. How's your morning, by the way?"

"My morning is great, especially since you've returned to the training ground," the coach said with a chuckle. "We can now begin serious preparations for the Champions League final. I hope you already went through the calf strengthening exercises while healing."

"I did during the last seven days of my recovery period," Zachary said. "My calf muscles are already back to normal."

"Okay, that's a relief," Coach Max Allegri said with a smile. "But to be safe, we'll still not rush you into the intensive exercises. You can do some little ball work, including rondos and the lighter tactical drills, with the others for today. But please take it slow until we're sure you're back to full fitness. Understood?"

"Yes, coach," Zachary replied.

"Good," Coach Max Allegri nodded with a smile. "You can now join the others. We'll begin the warm-up drills as soon as possible."

"Yes, coach," Zachary said. He then ran back to the pitch and joined his teammates.

The training session commenced after a few minutes, and Zachary immediately matched his teammates to perform all the warm-up exercises. Whether it was the light jogs, high knees, butt kicks, leg swings, and kickbacks, among other routines, he went through them all without experiencing any bit of discomfort in his calf muscles.

Later, at around ten, he joined the team tactical drills focusing on formations and swift transitions from defense to striking. He again performed exceptionally well and impressed his teammates and coaches. His sharpness on the ball and passing accuracy were near-perfect, causing those watching to wonder whether he was just from injury. But even then, the coaches insisted he take things slow and sent him back home to rest at lunchtime.

He returned to the training ground on Wednesday morning, feeling well-rested and energetic. He again performed well and impressed the coaches during the morning sessions. But they still didn't allow him to partake in the intensive afternoon sessions. Instead, they dispatched him off to the gym, where he spent two hours undergoing gym work under the supervision of the Juventus on-pitch medics.

The following day was a Thursday, and only two days remained before the long-awaited UEFA Champions League final. As such, the coaches integrated Zachary into all the team's training sessions to allow him to master the tactics for the game against Barcelona.

Zachary, in turn, worked harder than ever to master everything the coaches required of him. He was abnormally motivated since he wanted to play his best football ever during the Champions League final. He struggled hard and learned all the tactics, set-piece routines, and attacking transitions by the end of Thursday.

Then, Friday, which happened to be the eve of the Champions League final, finally arrived. Zachary once again performed exceptionally well during the morning sessions. His dribbling sharpness, set-piece precision, and passing acuity had almost returned to normal. He impressed all the coaches again with his skills on the training ground and ended the four-day preparations for the final on a high note.

What followed was the moment of truth. Coach Max Allegri summoned all the players to the tactics room for the pre-game tactical meeting at midday. He wasted no time and began to talk about the final against Barcelona immediately after the players took their seats.

"I hope you're all having a wonderful afternoon," he began. "We've been seriously preparing for the UEFA Champions League final for five days. We have all worked hard to grasp the tactics for the game against Barcelona. And tomorrow is finally the day we put all those strategies to the test. It is the day we'll go all out to win the Champions League and bring the UEFA trophy back to Turin. Are you guys excited?"

"Yes, we are," the players replied, more or less in unison.

"Are you ready to head to Berlin and win the Champions League trophy?"

"Yes, we are," the players replied again.

"I like the spirit," Coach Max Allegri said with a smile. "As you all know, we plan to travel to Berlin on a 4:00 PM flight today. We hope to arrive at around eight and spend the night there. Then, we'll inspect the venue for the final and hold a light training session tomorrow morning. After that, we can all relax in Berlin while waiting for the final.

"Since our time is scarce, I'll now read the provisional line-up for tomorrow. In goal, we'll go with Gianluigi Buffon, our captain, while our backline will constitute Patrice Evra, Leonardo Bonucci, Giorgio Chiellini, and Stephan Lichtsteiner."

"Moving on to midfield. We'll play with three holding midfielders, including Arturo Vidal, Roberto Pereyra, and Claudio Marchisio, while Zachary Bemba will play as our sole advanced playmaker. And finally, we'll utilize the services of Carlos Tevez and Álvaro Morata as our two strikers to complete our 4-3-1-2 formation."

"Moving on to the bench," the coach continued. "We'll have Marco Storari, Andrea Barzagli, Simone Padoin, Stefano Sturaro, Kingsley Coman, Fernando Llorente, and lastly, Andres Pirlo, who is not with us at the moment but has just passed the fitness tests today."

Most players, including Zachary, cheered when they heard Andrea Pirlo's name on the line-up. The Maestro had been nursing a calf injury, which he picked up during the first leg of Juventus' semi-final against Borussia Dortmund about four weeks ago. Fortunately for Juventus, he had passed the fitness tests on time and could thus partake in the following day's final. Of course, his presence was more than

welcomed by all the Juventus players and coaches who yearned to win the Champions League more than anything.

Coach Allegri smiled when he saw his players cheering. He nodded and said, "First, listen, people. As we've already discussed all week, Barcelona, our opponents, are a team that relies on their incredible Tiki-taka style to break down opposing teams. They will play short, intricate, and accurate passes throughout the game, with the primary aim being to keep possession for long periods, work the ball through various channels, and ultimately reach advanced positions, where they can create scoring opportunities."

"To combat this playing style, we must work hard in defense and midfield. We must go all out to win the ball before hitting the opponents with swift counterattacks. That's why we'll have three holding midfielders on the pitch, with the role to win back possession and set up Zachary, Tevez, and Morata with first-time through passes."

"All in all, we won't try to beat Barcelona at their own style of Tiki-taka football. But we'll instead rely on our hard work to break down their passing before unleashing through passes to our attackers, who will do their best to score. Are we on the same page, guys?"

"Yes, coach," the players replied.

"Do any of you have any questions?" The coach asked.

Zachary gritted his teeth and raised his hand.

Coach Max Allegri was surprised. But he still gave him the go-ahead to ask the question by pointing at him.

"Coach!" Zachary began. "Our 4-3-1-2 line-up is narrow and will leave openings in the wing areas for Messi and Neymar to exploit. Of course, we can rectify that by having one of our holding midfielders cover the flanks when Barcelona is attacking through the wing. But that will again leave gaps for the strong Barcelona midfield to exploit in the middle. Coach! How should we handle this problem?"

Coach Allegri smiled. "Of course, I know well that we lack numbers in the wings. But we can't sacrifice any of our midfielders to rectify the problem. So, what we can do is to remain tenacious while defending."

"In particular, all midfielders must work hard to cover our two wing-backs when they are up against Barcelona's wing duo of Messi and Neymar. I know that that will also leave gaps in the midfield. But we can also overcome that through collective hard work when we defend as a team. Does that answer your question, Zachary?"

Zachary nodded and showed no change of expression. But on the inside, he was still worried.

He feared that the lack of numbers in the wings would give Barcelona's incredible wingers opportunities to create several goal-scoring opportunities, like what transpired in the final of his previous life. But since the coach had already decided, he could only remain silent and wait for the game before thinking about how to rectify the issue himself.

Coach Allegri smiled and turned away from Zachary. "Whether I mentioned your name on the line-up or not, we'll all travel together to Berlin for the finals. We'll board the flight as a team at 4:00 PM and hope to arrive in Germany by eight. So, you should all return home and pack your bags before quickly returning here. We must set off for the airport at 2:45 PM. Understood?"

"Yes, coach."

Chapter 603 Pre-Match Excitement Around the Olympiastadion

Saturday, June 6th, 2015

Olympiastadion, Berlin, Germany.

Time: 5:45 PM

The atmosphere in this famous city in Germany was beyond explosive.

The excitement levels had already risen to the skies as fans of both teams eagerly awaited the commencement of the UEFA Champions League final between Juventus and Barcelona.

There were still three hours to the kick-off of the highly anticipated final. Nevertheless, thousands of supporters donning their respective team colors had long crowded along the routes leading to the renowned Olympiastadion, which was obviously the venue of the battle between two footballing giants gunning for European football glory.

With just a glance, one could see many somebodies in blue and garnet jerseys hoisting up posters of Lionel Messi, Neymar, and Andrés Iniesta, among other Barcelona stars. Then, looking across the street, one could spot other fans in Juventus' black and white colors holding up banners of Juventus players like Zachary Bemba, Gianluigi Buffon, Carlos Tevez, Andrea Pirlo, Leonardo Bonucci, Giorgio Chiellini, and Arturo Vidal, among other famous Old Lady stars.

The fans of both teams were doing their best to support their teams even before the commencement of the final. Their excited voices occasionally ignited the atmosphere around them as they sang chants of their teams or the names of their footballing stars.

Paolo Favero, a staunch fan of Juventus who had arrived in Berlin the previous day, was among the crowd. Beside him were several friends who were of the same football religion. They had also traveled to watch the final, and just like him, they were also sporting Juventus black and white striped jerseys.

Unlike his friends, Paolo was particularly quiet that evening. He was full of grand expectations for his team but also a bit anxious. His heart was already beating fast and hard with yearning as he waited for the game that could make or break his team's football season.

If Juventus could win, they would complete a year of football on a high note. But if they lost, many would forget their achievements in the other domestic competitions, and all the glory would go to Barcelona.

There was also the question of Zachary winning the Ballon d'Or at stake. If the Old Lady could beat the Catalans, he would increase his chances of becoming the best player in the world by a significant margin.

But if the results were the other way round, then Lionel Messi, the incredible star of Barcelona, would most likely win that prestigious award another time.

"Paolo!" Greta Stefani, a bubbly-looking girl who was one of his friends, called out. "Don't stand there and ruin the mood. Come and join us! Let's take a selfie to commemorate this moment."

Paolo smiled and nodded. He quickly joined his other friends, and they started posing for photographs while still within the boisterous crowd of Juventus supporters. They repeatedly immortalized the moments before the final, hoping to keep them alive forever, especially if Juventus came out on top after the game.

But could they get their wish? Would their dreams come true? Would they witness their team winning the Champions League trophy and finally completing a long-awaited quadruple? They would start getting answers to their questions when the match between Juventus and Barcelona commenced in three hours.

The pre-match extravaganzas continued as the minutes flashed by. The atmosphere grew even more heated as more and more enthusiastic football devotees crowded along the streets leading to the stadium. There were also droves of many others who were impatient. They didn't wait outside the stadium for the teams to arrive but headed inside, hoping to grab their seats before it was too late.

One and a half hours passed just like that, and the clock hands around Berlin finally pointed to the 7:15 PM mark. It was at that moment that the visage of the first team bus started appearing in the distance, causing all the waiting fans outside the stadium to go even more wild with excitement.

The bus in question snaked its way through the crowds, and before long, everyone outside the stadium could make out its blue and garnet colors, meaning it belonged to Barcelona.

On realizing what it represented, most of the Juventus supporters crowding along the roads wrinkled their faces with annoyance. It was as if their eyes had accidentally landed on the foulest substance in the world, and they quickly turned their heads away with irritation.

But it was a different story for the Barcelona fans, who immediately turned more jubilant. They cheered with more zeal, their passionate voices constantly vocalizing names like Lionel Messi, Neymar, Iniesta, and Luis Suárez as they watched their team bus slowly approach the stadium entrance.

In response, some of the Barcelona players, like Gerard Piqué, Dani Alves, Neymar, and Luis Suárez, pushed their heads out of the bus windows and waved to the crowds, causing more waves of delight to explode all over the place.

But that was only the beginning, and the excitement levels soon reached a climax when the Barcelona players began alighting from the bus. All the famous stars, including the mesmerizing Lionel Messi, the incredible Iniesta, and the tantalizing Neymar, all walked with a purpose as they left the bus and headed towards the stadium entrance. Of course, some waved to the waiting fans once or twice, causing them to almost die from delight before they disappeared into the tunnels leading to the dressing room.

"Did you just notice that," Enzo Ballesteros, a young man sporting a Barcelona jersey, said. "This is real... I think Messi just waved and smiled at me..."

"Stop dreaming!" Andres Castellano, his friend similarly in a Barcelona jersey, squashed his claims without fear or favor. "We're standing behind dozens of supporters wearing the same Barcelona jersey. How could Messi's gaze jump over all those people to wave and smile at you? Do you think you're his long-lost relative?"

"I knew you wouldn't believe me even when I'm speaking the truth," Enzo said with a casual shrug. "Andres! Do you think we'll win the final? Do you believe that we'll beat Juventus and achieve European glory?"

"We surely will," Andres Castellano said emphatically. "All our stars are in great shape. Messi is as great as ever, while other players like Rakitić, Busquets, Neymar, Iniesta, and Suárez are at the top of their games. But on the side of Juventus, Zachary Bemba has just returned from injury, while Andrea Pirlo is doubtful for the final. Without those two, Juventus will lack the sharpness they have commanded all season, and we can defeat them by playing our usual game of denying them possession."

Enzo was just about to say something else. But right then, a commotion broke out from the other side of the road occupied by the Juventus fans. Thinking of something, he turned towards the distance and saw Juventus' bus slowly approaching.

It snaked through the boisterous crowds and quickly arrived before the gates. Without further ado, the Juventus players, including Zachary and the supposedly injured Andrea Pirlo, alighted from the vehicle and waved to the fans before disappearing towards the tunnels.

"Juventus! Juve..."

"Andrea..."

"Zachary Bemba..."

"Carlos Tevez..."

At that instant, the Juventus fans showed why they were the big bosses of Europe when it came to cheering their teams. They yelled like there was no tomorrow, their chorus of chaotic voices hitting a drawn-out crescendo until all the Juventus players had disappeared inside the stadium entrance. After that, they all started rushing towards the stadium gates like a flood, eager to take their seats before the warm-up routines of both teams commenced.

Zachary followed his teammates down the stairs and into the tunnels leading to the dressing room. He had arrived with his teammates and coaches in Berlin the previous evening, and as planned, they had spent the night at the historic Hotel Berlin.

After enjoying a peaceful night of rest, they followed a morning routine of having breakfast, inspecting the pitch of the Olympiastadion, and going through a light training session under the supervision of the Juventus coaches. Then, aside from taking meals, they spent the rest of the day relaxing in their rooms, and here they were now, ready to play the UEFA Champions League final against Barcelona.

Zachary's heart pumped fast with boundless excitement as he walked towards the dressing room. The almost-silent waves of cheers trickling into his ears continuously ignited his fighting spirit. He was growing more and more eager to step on the pitch and perform at his best.

He was obviously aware that he had just returned from injury and was not yet at his peak. But he truly believed that he could overcome that small hardship with his incredible array of skills. He would also utilize his passion for the game to overcome his limits and ensure that he did his part during the game. He didn't wish to let his teammates down.

Boundless expectations flashed through his head as he followed his teammates and coaches. Under the guidance of the UEFA officials, they soon arrived before their assigned dressing room. But before they could enter, the door on the other side opened, and the Barcelona players, including Messi, Neymar, Iniesta, and several others, started striding out.

Without as much as saying a simple hi, the Catalans, who were already in their warm-up gear, slowly made their way past the similarly silent Juventus players. They treated the Old Lady players like air and didn't say any needless greetings. Then, under the lead of Andrés Iniesta, their captain, they soon picked up their pace and started disappearing around the bend leading to the pitch.

Zachary could feel the tension building around the rest of his teammates and coaches as they all watched the disappearing backs of the Barcelona players. The fighting spirit around the team was palpable, and the vibrancy of some players, like Patrice Evra and Stephan Lichtsteiner, who would be facing off against Messi and Neymar, was sky-high. One thing was for sure. All the Juventus players yearned to step onto the pitch and do their best to help their team win the final.

"Well! What are you all gawking at?"

Coach Max Allegri's voice dissipated the tense atmosphere around the place just after the Barcelona players disappeared around the bend. As usual, he had dressed to kill, his fitting black suit, matching tie, and gentle shoes making him look like the perfect gentleman. But his eyes were the opposite of what a gentleman should possess. They exuded an intense fighting spirit as he swept them across his players.

"As you can all see, we're a bit behind the opponents," he said. "Let's hurry and prepare before heading to the pitch for our pre-match warm-up."

"Yes, coach," the players replied before flooding into the dressing room.

Chapter 604 The Peak Stage of European Club Football

Emily Anderson, Zachary's agent, had already taken her seat in the stands of the Olympiastadion to watch the Champions League final. Her emotions were beyond complex as she waited to witness her young client's performance in a match that could define his career.

She worried for Zachary as she understood that he had just overcome a minor injury. But even then, she still wished to see him defy common sense and perform beyond expectations.

She wanted to see him play exceptionally well during the final so that he could take home the Champions League trophy. She hoped to see him outshine everyone else that season and raise his chances of winning that year's Ballon d'Or.

Sitting close to Emily were some of Zachary's acquaintances who had also come to see him face Barcelona. They included his former teammates, like Paul Kasongo, the Otterson brothers, Mikael Dorsin, and Thomas Partey. There were also his employees, plus former and current trainers nearby, including Coach Bjørn Peters (his fitness trainer), Coach Johansen (the Rosenborg coach), Inger (his live-in chef), Lorenzo Riccardo (his bodyguard), and Kristin Stein, who had taken some time away from nursing his sick grandpa to watch the game.

Emily Anderson was only close to Bjørn Peters, Kristin, and Inger. She had tried conversing with them while watching the two teams go through the pre-match dynamic warm-ups that had started only minutes ago. But because of the sheer intensity of the noise around the place, Emily had quickly abandoned the notion. She just gave up as she didn't have the energy to continue yelling at the top of her lungs just to make a simple discussion possible.

And so, she remained silent while taking in the boisterous scenes within the stadium.

On the pitch, the players of both teams were seriously going through the pre-match warm-up routines. The Barcelona players had taken up one side of the pitch while the Juventus stars had occupied the other. Both teams didn't give any attention to their fans as the only thing that seemed to be on every player's mind was preparing for the soon-to-commence final.

Emily's eyes took in all these sights. Her gaze paused on famous Barcelona players like Lionel Messi, Andrés Iniesta, and a few more for a second or two. But she soon ignored them, as they didn't interest her much. She readily returned her focus to Zachary, who was repeatedly running through cone drills as he prepared for the game that would define his career. Her eyes softened, and she silently wished him the best during the game for the umpteenth time that evening.

The pre-match proceedings moved forward fast when the players ended their warm-up routines. They returned to their dressing rooms, where they quickly made their final preparations, including donning their match gear and listening to the pre-match addresses of their respective coaches.

The clock hands around Berlin soon pointed to the half-past eight mark, signifying that only fifteen minutes remained before the planned kick-off time of the game. On cue, the players and coaches put everything else aside before heading out into the tunnels, eager to make their way to the pitch. They walked quickly, and within half a minute, they all made two neat lines before the stairs leading to the playing field.

At that juncture, the Barcelona players queued on the right side of the tunnel, beginning with Andrés Iniesta, their captain. In a simultaneous fashion, the Juventus players also lined up on the left side, starting with Buffon, their goalkeeper and captain. And, as usual, groups of youngsters sporting similar jerseys to the two sides also made a timely appearance to hold the hands of the stars of their respective teams.

Everything was in place, and the schedule progressed quickly and smoothly. The match officials picked up the ball and led the two lines of players and the lucky kids holding their hands up the stairs and towards the pitch.

Under the focus of countless cameras, they soon passed by the UEFA Champions League trophy displayed atop a magnificent stand and swiftly exited the tunnels. They immediately stepped onto the pitch of the Olympiastadion, where their senses took in the thunderous applause and other wondrous scenes of the opening ceremony.

The pitch had long turned into something akin to a gigantic piece of artwork. Within less than thirty minutes, when the teams were preparing, the organizers had finalized everything to do with the UEFA Champions League opening ceremony. They had spread expansive and blue carpet-like decorations all over the field, with the highlight being the flags of Juventus and Barcelona held up by smartly dressed individuals on each side. Then, at the center of it all was a large depiction of a ball made up of blue stars that was the logo of this prestigious European competition. The scenes of the opening ceremony were just that dazzling.

Zachary observed all the incredible sights as he followed his teammates and lined up before the dugout. His ears could pick up the loud chants of the more than 70,000 supporters in attendance that soon subsided and gave way to the UEFA Champions League Anthem sung by a choir of musicians smartly dressed in all-black suits. His heart continued racing all the way up to the point when the pre-match routines ended, and he took his position on the field of play.

Everything around, including the breathtaking depiction of a giant trophy hanging on one side of the stadium and the spectacular colors within the stands, reminded him that he was already experiencing the peak stage of European club football. And all he had to do was perform as usual and help his team win yet another trophy for that season.

A couple of more minutes passed, and the big moment arrived. The referee finally blew the whistle to signal the commencement of the match, causing waves of thunderous cheers to explode around the Olympiastadion.

On cue, Carlos Tevez, the striker waiting over the ball, flicked it to the nearby Álvaro Morata. The latter passed it back toward the side Juventus to kick start the long-awaited UEFA Champions League final.

The action was on, and the Juventus players quickly arrayed themselves in a 4-3-1-2 formation while moving the ball forward during the opening minutes. They played slow but intricate passes at the back, hoping to quickly settle down in the game before attempting to create goal-scoring chances.

As for Barcelona, they organized themselves into their traditional 4-3-3 formation before quickly starting to work hard to win possession. And as usual, some of their players, like Luis Suárez, Ivan Rakitić, Sergio Busquets, and Andrés Iniesta, were exceptional on this front. They ran at every Juventus player who received the ball until they forced a long pass forward out of Roberto Pereyra, who was playing as one of Juventus' three defensive midfielders.

That instance marked the change in possession from Juventus to Barcelona, with the Catalans soon starting to do their thing of playing short and intricate passes that were the true defining feature of their Tiki-Taka style. They quickly worked the ball from defense, hoping to exploit any gaps within the midfield.

But of course, the Juventus team had prepared well for this situation by fielding three defensive midfielders plus Zachary, the advanced playmaker, in the middle of the field. They had all the numerical superiority in the central positions — a reality that forced the Barcelona players to fail miserably at their first attempt to execute their Tiki-Taka football.

But would this simple hardship stop Barcelona from finding a way to dominate the game? Would fielding many midfielders prevent the Catalans from doing what they do best? Would this strategy stop one of the best teams in Europe from dominating possession?

The answer became apparent within the next three minutes.

The Catalans didn't waste much time before utilizing the wing areas instead of working the ball through the crowded defensive midfield channels.

Everything began with Jordi Alba, Barcelona's left-back for the day, who unleashed a pass along the touchline to find Neymar on the same left flank during the 4th minute. His timing was perfect, and he took advantage of Juventus' lack of wingers to find his Brazilian teammate in space.

Of course, Juventus tried to close this gap in their formation by having Arturo Vidal step out of the midfield to close down Neymar. But Neymar did his magic and skipped past the opponent before playing a couple of one-twos with Andrés Iniesta to exploit the gap left by Vidal in midfield. They then continued linking up well to rush past Stephan Lichtsteiner, Juventus' right-back, before finding themselves deep within Juventus' half.

At that point, Barcelona showed why they were one of the most dangerous sides within the advanced positions of the final third. Their snappy passes flowed fluidly like stream water among their players, including Sergio Busquets, Andrés Iniesta, Ivan Rakitić, and Luis Suárez, until the ball returned to Neymar, who had just stepped into an unmarked pocket of space at the edge of Juventus' box.

Neymar, on his part, didn't choose to take on any defenders with his dribbling. He instead played another sweet and immaculate pass to Andrés Iniesta.

The latter also didn't lose a second before turning with the ball and squaring it further into the box. His timing was beyond perfect, and he managed to thread the ball toward the sprinting path of Ivan Rakitić, who was arriving in the area.

All this was Barcelona at its best, with Ivan Rakitić completing the perfect passage of play. The Croatian outwitted a couple of Juventus players to connect with Iniesta's pass before maintaining his composure and hammering a shot past the outstretched arms of Buffon. And just like that, he effortlessly found the back of the net to score Barcelona's first goal for the night during the 5th minute.

Chapter 605 Crisis

Barcelona's 5th-minute goal didn't unsettle Juventus' game plan. The Italian giants remained patient and defensive while waiting for chances to counterattack. But in so doing, they allowed Barcelona to continue dominating possession.

The Barcelona players were really on fire after scoring the early opening goal. They continued avoiding Barcelona's midfield while repeatedly utilizing the spaces on the flanks to advance the ball out of the final third. Their Tiki-taka was as potent as ever as they went at Juventus with everything they got.

But, like with every football match, even the best of teams could commit some mistakes. Even the best players could misplace a pass or two, or fail to dribble past an opponent, thereby gifting possession to the opponent. That was what happened during the 16th minute of gameplay.

Andrés Iniesta, Barcelona's captain, worked his magic and found Neymar with a through ball to an advanced position on the left wing. However, the Brazilian winger tried to dribble past Stephan Lichtsteiner and failed miserably. A sliding tackle from the Juventus right-back robbed him of the ball, and he ended up gifting possession to Juventus.

What followed was a fierce counterattack by Juventus. Claudio Marchisio, one of Juventus' three defensive midfielders, reacted immediately. He collected the loose ball and swiftly passed it to Arturo Vidal, his counterpart in midfield.

Arturo Vidal was like a magician on the ball at that juncture. He took a well-timed first touch to step past Ivan Rakitić, the Barcelona midfielder harassing him, before unleashing a pass forward to find Zachary.

Zachary felt his heart pumping hard as he met the ball from Vidal close to the center circle. He collected it on a half-turn before spinning around and facing towards Barcelona's side of the pitch.

Of course, the Barcelona players didn't allow him the freedom to advance the ball. Sergio Busquets, Barcelona's defensive midfielder, swiftly rushed forward to close him down. The midfielder came in all guns blazing, knowing full well that Juventus' counterattack would become deadly if Zachary took a few steps into Barcelona's half.

Zachary, on his part, didn't panic as he watched Busquets closing him down. He stepped over the ball once and leaned to the left as if wishing to rush past Sergio Busquets in that direction. But just as the opponent began reacting, he suddenly halted his bodily motion halfway.

Zachary's SS-graded balance, coordination, and dribbling skills bloomed in full splendor. He deftly altered his center of gravity and abruptly shifted to the right. He then increased his speed and carried the ball via Sergio Busquets' opposite side to complete his incredible dribble.

Of course, Sergio Busquets didn't let him go as a final was on the line. The Barcelona midfielder swiftly whirled around and tried to take Zachary down by grabbing and pulling his shirt.

But who was Zachary? He was a player who had gotten used to such situations while playing against the most ruthless defenders in the Italian League.

He relied on his experience to wiggle his body out of the way and bend forward. In so doing, he dodged Sergio Busquets and continued advancing the fierce counterattack towards Barcelona's half at a lightning-fast pace.

What followed was a display of Zachary's sprinting abilities. He cut through the pitch like a thunderbolt and jumped over a tackle from Javier Mascherano as he continued approaching the box.

As expected, Gerard Piqué, Barcelona's center-back, finally rushed forward to check his run after he entered the final third. Nonetheless, Zachary chose not to tango with the center back. He instead waited and waited for the defender to approach before executing his move. He unleashed the ball to his left at the right moment to find Carlos Tevez, the Juventus striker, who had made a timely move past the defensive line.

Olympiastadion, the famous stadium of Berlin, exploded with cheers as Carlos Tevez controlled the ball mid-stride with acres of unmarked space ahead of him. The Argentine striker wasted no time before driving forward like the wind towards Barcelona's box.

Marc-André Ter Stegen, the Barcelona keeper, rushed out of goal to meet him at the edge of the box. The keeper timed his move well to block all the shooting angles and force Tevez to drift further to the right.

But Tevez didn't give up as a rare opportunity to score an equalizer for Juventus was before him. He used his speed and footwork to rush past the keeper before unleashing an effort toward Barcelona's goal from a very tight angle.

A momentary silence descended upon the pitch as the ball drifted forward, on course towards the back of the net. But just at the last moment, before it could cross the line, a silhouette slid in and intercepted the effort.

The Barcelona player who had acted was Dani Alves. The Brazilian rushed in, skidding as if the laws of physics didn't apply to him, before raising his boot and kicking the ball away. He made a timely interception to save Barcelona from conceding the equalizing goal during the 17th minute and sent the ball flying towards the left side of the box.

"Shit!"

Both Zachary and Tevez reacted to seeing such an unexpected result. They didn't lose any second before racing towards the ball. They hoped to collect it and resume the attack against Barcelona's goal right away.

However, all their efforts amounted to nothing as Gerard Piqué, the Barcelona center-back, beat them to the ball. The Barcelona man smashed it with zest and cleared it away from his half. He sent it flying like a surface-to-surface missile toward the right side of the pitch.

"Hurry and fall back! Shape up and defend..."

Massimiliano Allegri's panicked voice sounded from the sidelines at that moment. The Italian coach spewed words at the pace of a machine gun, calling for his players to shape up and avoid Barcelona's counterattack.

But alas, the Juventus players were not supersonic racing machines. They had all advanced forward to attack Barcelona's half and couldn't regain their defensive shape immediately. They could only struggle to run back into their positions as Lionel Messi connected with the long ball from Gerard Piqué in an advanced position on the right flank.

The counterattack was on for Barcelona, and Messi didn't waste the rare opportunity. He effortlessly collected the ball before driving forward like a Formula One driver on the race track.

The Argentine used a combination of his footwork and brilliant change of pace to dribble past Claudio Marchisio. He then skipped past a sliding challenge from Leonardo Bonucci before penetrating the box from the right side.

The experienced Gianluigi Buffon rushed out of goal to stop the attack. But Lionel Messi remained composed and did his magic. He dipped his shoulder and skipped past Buffon with his signature change of pace before threading the ball towards the goal from a tight angle. He effortlessly found the back of the net to score Barcelona's second goal for the night.

It was only the 18th minute of the UEFA Champions League final. But Barcelona was already leading by two goals to nil. For sure, Juventus was in crisis.

Chapter 606 An Opportunity

The game continued after Barcelona's goal celebrations.

The Catalans were still on fire, even after scoring the second goal. They continued applying pressure on Juventus' defensive set-up with their Tiki-Tiki style while trying to find spaces to exploit all over the field. They were relentless with their attacks while dominating sixty percent of the ball possession.

The Juventus players, on their part, were performing below par. Their tactics were a mess, and they couldn't check the performance of the more driven Barcelona players. The Old Lady players could only hold on for dear life as they waited for half time, the only time they could reorganize.

Regrettably, the old saying held true for Juventus, and bad things came in twos or threes. When everything was going downhill, something worse happened sooner rather than later.

The Juventus players had stuck to their game plan even after conceding the two goals. They had remained compact in midfield and defensive as a whole. They had focused on preventing Barcelona from advancing into forward areas by crowding out those central areas in front of their box.

But the same issue that had caused them to concede the first two goals still impacted them. Their narrow 4-3-1-2 formation, focusing on numerical superiority and compactness in central areas, left a lot

of gaps on the flanks. The same problem allowed Barcelona to exploit their lack of wingers and the acres of space in the wings to create another goal-scoring chance during the 39th minute.

Lionel Messi was once again the man who initiated Barcelona's brilliant passage of play. He drifted into the central areas and connected with a pass from Sergio Busquets before working his ball magic.

The little Argentine wonder skillfully skipped past Arturo Vidal before cleverly switching play to the left side of the pitch with a sudden long pass over the middle. He pinged the ball to Jordi Alba on the opposite border of the penalty area, who skillfully exchanged a lightning-fast one-two with Neymar to break into the box from the left side.

The Juventus defenders couldn't scramble back in time and prevent the damage before the Jordi-Neymar quick combination ended with Luis Suárez receiving the ball within the box.

Luis Suárez, on his part, was as composed as ever. He turned and twisted to avail space for himself and force a shooting angle. Then, just as suddenly, he hammered a carpet shot through the defender's legs and found the bottom left corner to score Barcelona's 3rd goal on the night during the 40th minute.

Juventus FC 0 : FC Barcelona 3

The cheers around the stadium hit a crescendo as the information on the jumbotron refreshed to indicate the new score.

The Barcelona fans were already going bonkers as they jubilated like never before. They sang at the top of their voices and hugged each other like the best buddies as their team celebrated the third goal on the field of play. They were having the time of their life as they witnessed their team destroy Juventus, another footballing giant in Europe.

"Well, well," the voice of Steve Bower, the commentator for the night, sounded at that moment. "This is a complete smashing by Barcelona. The Catalans have outmatched Juventus in every aspect of the game, whether in tactics, morale, or individual brilliance. It's only the 40th minute, but they are already leading by three goals to nil. The 2015 UEFA Champions League final might already be theirs."

"True!" Conor McNamara, the other commentator, said. "I expected a tightly contested match. But Juventus has really disappointed me. All the Old Lady players seem to lack the zeal to win the final. They lack creativity and are not doing enough off the ball, an issue that has allowed Barcelona to find spaces in the advanced areas of the field. I don't know what's up with them."

"Massimiliano Allegri's tactics have also been below par," Steve Bower commented. "I can see what he's trying to do. He wants his players to remain compact in the midfield while waiting for opportunities to counterattack. But this is clearly not working. The Barcelona players aren't making many mistakes on the ball, leaving no chances for Juve to exploit and launch their counters."

"Indeed," Conor McNamara agreed. "The only critical mistake that could have resulted in a goal was that of Neymar. That was when the Brazilian winger tried to dribble past Stephan Lichtsteiner during the 16th minute and failed miserably. Juventus capitalized on the mistake and launched a counter, which ended with Tevez on a one-on-one with Ter Stegen, Barcelona's keeper, at the other end of the pitch."

"However, Carlos Tevez missed the God-sent opportunity, allowing Barcelona to launch their own counterattack. That was what resulted in the second goal for Barcelona."

"Well," Steve Bower said. "Those are the issues that come with missing opportunities in a high-stakes football game. The missed chances always come back to bite you."

"Barcelona has been a better side at converting chances. First, they benefited from Juventus' missed opportunity to score the second goal. They have now extended their lead to three goals after a brilliant switch-of-play by the one and only - Lionel Messi allowed Jordi Alba to find Luis Suárez in the box. Suárez, on his part, didn't miss and found the back of the net to score Barcelona's third with only five minutes before halftime."

"Do you think Juventus still has a chance?" Conor McNamara asked. "Can they turn this game around and win the final?"

Steve Bower chuckled. "It will be difficult since they are playing Barcelona, one of the best, if not the 'very best' European team. But I still think they can if they change a few things."

"One, they must find a way to get Zachary more involved in the game. They must find a way to allow him to play to his strengths. He has been on the defensive, constantly running around his half to block passing routes the entire time. He's not a number six. He's a playmaker — a goal-creator, and I don't think this is where a brilliant number 10 should be. Instead, he should be on the other side of the pitch, running at the Barcelona players and creating goal-scoring chances."

"Two, Max Allegri should introduce Andrea Pirlo and a wide player like Kingsley Coman. By doing that, he will increase his team's prospects of launching counters through Pirlo's long balls while also checking Barcelona's dominance in the wing areas."

"That might not work," Conor McNamara remarked. "But you must understand that Allegri must take off a central midfielder to bring on a winger. That will open up spaces in the central areas for Barcelona's strong midfield to exploit. The switch could work against him."

"True," Steve Bower agreed. "But Max Allegri has got to do something. Right? He doesn't have many options since he's already losing the final by three goals to nil. He has to risk it and take off a midfielder to bring on one more attack-minded winger."

Conor McNamara chuckled and continued with the game commentary. "Well, the game has restarted, and Juventus are on the attack for the first time in what has really been a while. Claudio Marchisio is on the ball. He passes to Arturo Vidal, who in turn finds Carlos Tevez."

"Carlos Tevez on the ball. He turns and plays the ball to Zachary. Zachary has controlled it well. Oh, what an intelligent set of skills. Zachary has skipped past Ivan Rakitić with a brilliant display of footwork. He plays the ball back to Tevez. Oh, it's a foul!"

"Javier Mascherano, one of Barcelona's center-backs for the day, has taken out Carlos Tevez, his countryman, with a ruthless sliding tackle just a few yards away from the box," the commentary continued. "The referee has shown him a yellow card and awarded Juventus a free-kick in a dangerous area with only two minutes remaining to half time. This could be a chance for Juventus to grab a lifeline for this game."

"Indeed," Steve Bower, the second commentator, agreed. "Juventus have Zachary, one of the most lethal dead-ball specialists in the world. If he can make something out of the free-kick, it could be the beginning of Juventus' comeback in this UEFA Champions League final."

Zachary's heart was beating fast and hard with tension as he took a few steps back after placing the ball on the free-kick spot. He knew what was at stake, so he couldn't seem to contain his anxiety.

If he could find the back of the net and score, his teammates' morale would explode, and Juventus would have a better chance at making a comeback during the second half.

But if he failed to convert, the situation would be different. His team would head into halftime while demoralized, and that could push them to continue performing below par during the second half.

That was how crucial the free-kick was at that point in the game. It could literally decide which team would have the momentum during the second half of the UEFA Champions League final.

'I must score.' Zachary resolved. He took a deep breath and started observing the situation ahead of him.

The referee had already finished organizing the placement of the wall. Some Barcelona players, including Neymar, Sergio Busquets, Gerard Piqué, Luis Suárez, and Ivan Rakitić, had already taken their positions in the defensive wall.

But that wasn't the end of Barcelona's defensive arrangements. Andrés Iniesta, the Barcelona captain, had lied down behind the defensive wall to block any avenues of a potential carpet shot below the wall that might threaten his goal.

Lastly, the other Catalans were tightly marking the Juventus players in the box while Ter Stegen, the keeper, was between the posts, watching Zachary like a predator watching its prey.

That was how far Barcelona had gone to ensure Zachary wouldn't convert the free-kick. That was how serious the Catalans were in stopping any chances of Juventus making a comeback. They wanted to crush any hopes of Juventus before seeing their win through during the second half.

Chapter 607 A Possible Turning Point

FWEEEEEEEE

The referee blew the whistle and signaled for Zachary to take the free kick. On cue, a stillness seemed to descend upon the stadium as everyone watching waited with bated breath for the result that could be a turning point for Juventus in the game.

Zachary could feel the force of the full tension in the air. The anxiety was a result of the expectations placed upon his shoulders. But he forced everything else out of his mind and focused only on the free-kick.

He relied on his SS-graded spatial awareness and risk assessment to assess the defensive wall set-up and the positioning of the keeper in a few seconds.

His Dead-Ball specialist juju soon came into play. He made an angled run towards the ball before swinging his foot at it. His connection was just right, and he skillfully unleashed a curling shot over the defensive wall, hoping to find the top right corner.

By then, Marc-André Ter Stegen, the Barcelona keeper, had long taken action. He dived like a Ninja and threw himself towards the fast-approaching ball. At the same time, he stretched out a hand and struggled with his all to finally graze the ball with his fingertips.

That touch was the difference between heaven and hell. It sent the ball off its intended trajectory only by a slight margin. But that minor deviation was enough to cause an entirely different result from the free-kick.

BAM!

The thunderous free-kick ball smashed off the corner of the crossbar before bouncing back into the box.

What followed was a scuffle as the players of both teams went after the rebound like cats that had just caught the scent of catnip.

Álvaro Morata, the nearby Juventus striker, was the first to attempt to get to the ball as soon as possible. But the much more spirited Javier Mascherano beat him to it and cleared it out of play for the corner kick with a daredevil diving header.

'Shit!'

Zachary watched it all happen and felt like his world had turned darker. The cheers around the stadium felt especially grating to his ears. He could imagine that most Barcelona fans were busy celebrating that he had failed to convert the free kick while those of Juventus had their hopes shattered.

'Wait, why does this situation bring some familiar memories? There's still a chance!'

Zachary's expression turned earnest when he noticed the Barcelona players crowding around their keeper to celebrate the save. He made eye contact with Carlos Tevez before racing to the corner flag like the wind.

He swiftly picked the ball from the ball boy and placed it on the corner spot with all the haste he could muster. Just then, he noticed that Carlos Tevez, the striker who had gotten his sign, was already sprinting towards the corner flag like a lightning bolt.

Zachary quickly took the corner kick short and sent the ball to the approaching Tevez without waiting for the referee's whistle. He played a simple pass to the Argentine, who, in turn, exchanged a couple of one-tuos with him as they swiftly approached the box.

By then, the Barcelona players had started reacting to the situation. They were trying to shape up and defend against the quick corner kick. There were even a few, like Sergio Busquets and Ivan Rakitić, who were swiftly racing forward to check Zachary and Tevez's efforts.

But all their actions eventually fell short as Zachary didn't let them do as they intended. He received yet another return pass from Tevez before dipping his shoulder and stepping past Sergio Busquets with a swift change of pace.

The dribble allowed him to escape one opponent and cut further toward the central areas and toward the left corner of the box. But he didn't have any shooting angles available as Ivan Rakitić was already closing him down while covering the space he could exploit to take a shot at the goal.

It was at that moment that Zachary's SS-graded attributes came into play. His high body control and risk assessment qualities bloomed in great splendor, and he raised his leg as if he were about to unleash a missile of a shot at the goal.

The approaching Ivan Rakitić responded as expected. His body reacted instinctively, and he turned his face away while pushing his leg forward to block the would-be shot.

Zachary's expression loosened, and he abruptly halted the down-swinging motion of his leg on seeing the opponent's reaction. Then, before Ivan Rakitić could recover, he immaculately moved the ball to the side and opened a shooting angle. He availed some space for himself before pulling the trigger and unleashing a curling shot around the many players in the box.

Whoosh!

The ball seemed to defy the very core laws of physics. It bent all the way beyond the line of the goalpost before dipping and curling back toward its intended target. It soared in such an awkward trajectory before bouncing a few inches inside the far post and nestling in the back of the net.

"GOAL!"

Zachary pumped his fist to celebrate his 17th goal in the Champions League that season.

He had equaled Cristiano Ronaldo's record of the most goals scored in a single Champions League season. But he didn't waste time celebrating since his team still trailed 3:1 against Barcelona.

He just rushed forward and picked the ball from the back of the net. Then, just as swiftly, he sprinted all the way across the pitch before placing the ball back atop the center spot.

Zachary was using his actions to express his intentions. He wanted his teammates to follow his example and play with urgency. He wished for them to quickly build momentum and try to complete a comeback against Barcelona.

Of course, his teammates didn't let him down. They quickly followed his cue and took their positions. Their eyes were brimming with fighting spirit, meaning they hadn't given up on the game. They could at least still give Barcelona hell until the very last minute of the game.

FWEEEEEEEE

The game restarted after a few minutes with Barcelona's kick-off.

The Juventus players rushed forward and tried to win possession back. They used high-pressing tactics to pressure the Barcelona defenders and midfielders and force them to commit mistakes. They did everything possible to win the ball and create another chance before halftime.

Nonetheless, their efforts didn't amount to much due to clever game management strategies employed by Barcelona.

The Catalans didn't lose their calm after conceding. They instead skillfully held on to the ball with their Tiki-Taka style for the remaining minutes of the half without committing any blunders.

In that manner, the seconds slowly turned into minutes until the referee eventually blew the halftime whistle. He ended the first half and sent the teams into the tunnel with Barcelona still leading by three goals to one.

Chapter 608 Relentless Chasing of the Game

Coach Allegri's expression was somber as he welcomed his players into the dressing room for the halftime break. He understood he had to straighten his players' attitudes towards the game or risk shamefully losing the final.

He quickly started his pep talk and requested his players to work harder off the ball during the second half. He also encouraged them not to give up the game and urged them to continue fighting with all they had, emphasizing that goal-scoring chances would eventually come if they maintained their fighting spirit.

Finally, the coach narrowed his eyes and started announcing the changes for the second half.

"Vidal and Morata," the coach said. "You will give way to Andrea Pirlo and Kingsley Coman during the second half. With them on the pitch, we'll switch to a 4-4-1-1 formation."

"Pirlo and Marchisio will play as typical central midfielders occupying the center of the field. Zachary will be our attacking midfielder with the additional role of boosting Tevez on striking. As for Roberto Pereyra and Kingsley Coman, they will play as our wingers during the second half."

"The strategy is still the counterattack," the coach continued. "We defend and tirelessly work off the ball. We ensure we don't concede another goal until a chance avails itself. If we get the counterattacking opportunity, we play neat football and advance the ball through the wings or the middle, depending on the available space on the field."

"Pirlo, we'll require your expertise for this strategy to work." The coach turned to glance at the silent Maestro. "Whenever there's a chance to counterattack, you must quickly use long balls to find Coman, Pereyra, or Zachary up the pitch. That will allow us to skip over Barcelona's midfield and quickly threaten their defense after a turnover."

"I understand, coach," Pirlo gave his word.

The coach nodded and glanced at his watch. He then said a few more words to boost his players' morale before sending them back to the pitch for the second half.

The referee blew the whistle after the two Juventus substitutes stepped on the pitch. On cue, the second half of the UEFA Champions League commenced with Barcelona's kick-off amid the thunderous cheers within the Olympiastadion.

The Barcelona players immediately resumed their typical tactics. They started passing the ball among themselves with short and intricate passes.

A point to note was that they lowered the intensity of their runs since they were ahead by three goals to one. But they were still doing everything they could to control possession as they advanced the ball through available avenues.

Of course, the Juventus players couldn't let the opponents do as they pleased since they needed goals sooner rather than later. They had to work hard off the ball and win possession or risk never obtaining an opportunity to stage a comeback.

"Push forward! High press and win back the ball!"

Max Allegri's voice was constantly sounding from the sidelines. He couldn't sit still as he urged his players to be more aggressive and obtain possession.

In response, Juventus came alive with the coach's constant urging.

The Juventus attack-minded players, including Zachary, Tevez, Roberto Pereyra, and Kingsley Coman, rushed forward like a pack of wolves on the hunt. They flooded into the advanced positions within Barcelona's half to high-press the opponents. They did everything possible to pressure the opponents and force mistakes out of them.

In turn, the Barcelona players responded appropriately, just like the world-class talents they were. They quickened their passing tempo and moved the ball around with a clockwork rhythm.

Busquets to Iniesta! Rakitić to Messi! Jordi Alba to Neymar, and so on and so forth!!

Barcelona was simply at the best of its game, with passes flowing with the precision of laser beams from one player to another in quick succession. Tiki-taka soon became the order of the evening as the ball moved around the pitch.

Of course, the Juventus players didn't give up fighting for possession even under such circumstances. They had to continue working hard off the ball to match or raise the tempo and, in so doing, force mistakes out of Barcelona. They had to chase the game with all their resolve until a chance availed itself.

Fortunately, such a chance soon came when Barcelona failed to convert an opportunity during the 52nd minute.

Lionel Messi had cut inside the pitch and played a forward pass to Luis Suárez, who was arriving at the edge of the box. The latter skillfully skipped the ball and left it for Neymar, who was coming in from the left flank.

It was a crucial chance that saw Neymar pull the trigger and unleash a curling shot towards the goal. But the experienced Gianluigi Buffon, Juventus' keeper, read the Brazilian's effort like an open book and effortlessly snatched the ball out of the air.

That wasn't the end of the exciting action, though, as Buffon didn't rest on his laurels. The keeper quickly picked himself up and raced to the edge of the box. He hastily tossed the ball to Andrea Pirlo, the substitute midfielder who had just availed himself within an unmarked pocket of space in the defensive right midfield.

Pa!

The sound of the ball meeting a boot reverberated as Andrea Pirlo deftly controlled the ball. The Maestro then took another touch while scanning the field before doing what he did best.

He smashed the ball with a downward swing of his boot and unleashed a diagonal pass over the midfield. He skillfully took the opposing midfielders out of the equation by finding Kingsley Coman with a single long pass into the left wing.

Whoosh!

Kingsley Coman was like a whirlwind as he raced forward and connected with Andrea Pirlo's pin-point pass.

The counter was on, and the winger relied on his fresh legs to drive into the space left by Dani Alves on the left wing with all the pace he could muster. He soon stepped into the final third before squaring the ball to find Zachary in the middle.

Zachary, on his part, rushed away from Javier Mascherano, the defender harassing him, before connecting with the pass from Kingsley. He calmly collected the ball before playing an immediate diagonal pass to the right side of the box on the half-turn. He was hoping to find Roberto Pereyra, the other Juventus winger.

Roberto Pereyra didn't disappoint since he had already made a timely run from the right wing toward Barcelona's box. He calmly connected with the pass from Zachary and drove into the box with his pace. He then waited and waited to draw in the defenders before calmly squaring the ball toward the box, where Carlos Tevez was arriving.

It was a rare chance, and Carlos Tevez ensured that it counted. The Argentine pounced forward and skipped past Gerard Piqué with his pace before calmly guiding the ball into the back of the net with a simple tap. He relied on the ball's initial momentum to expertly squeeze it past the Barcelona keeper and score Juventus 2nd goal on the night during the 53rd minute.

Juventus FC 2 : FC Barcelona 3

The cheers of the Juventus fans hit a crescendo as the info on the stadium's jumbotron refreshed to indicate the fresh score. The Old Lady faithful were beyond themselves with joy as their team was almost completing a seemingly impossible comeback. They were all smiles and expectant to see their team score a third goal.

As for Tevez, the latest goal-scorer, he was brimming with boundless fighting spirit. He didn't waste time celebrating but quickly snatched the ball from the keeper before sprinting across the pitch and placing it atop the center spot. He, too, was like Zachary and only yearned for his team to win the Champions League final.

Chapter 609 We Attack, You Attack!

The game took an exhilarating turn between the 60th and 72nd minutes, with both teams unleashing a flurry of heart-pumping attacks. It was a football frenzy that left everyone on the edge of their seats.

The Barcelona and Juventus players threw caution to the wind and engaged in a game of high-octane football. The once tiki-taka style of Barcelona and Juventus' midfield compactness were nowhere to be seen. It was as if the players had all gone rogue, throwing all tactics out of the window and playing with reckless abandon.

The tension was palpable, and the excitement was at an all-time high as both teams went head-to-head in a thrilling match for the ages. With every passing moment, it seemed like the game could swing in either direction.

Barcelona would surge forward with lightning-fast speed that could rival the world's top sprinters, leaving Juventus scrambling to keep up. But just when it seemed like Barcelona had the upper hand, Juventus would make a startling comeback, snatching the ball and launching a counterattack that had fans on the edge of their seats, breathless with anticipation. It was a match that would go down in history as a true battle of champions.

Picture this: twelve minutes of heart-pounding action, with speedsters like Lionel Messi, Neymar, Luis Suárez, Dani Alaves, Zachary Bemba, Kingsley Coman, Carlos Tevez, and Stephan Lichtsteiner bringing their A-game to the field.

These speedsters were on fire, receiving the ball from their defensive counterparts and taking off like lightning bolts, driving through the field with all their might, exploiting gaps in the opposing formation, and attempting to score. It was raw and pure attack-minded football at its very best.

The theme for those minutes was clear - "We attack, you attack!" And attack they did, with raw and relentless energy, leaving tactics and formations behind.

But despite the sheer brilliance on display, the score remained unchanged for a long time. Barcelona was leading 3:2 against Juventus, but the game was far from over. The pressure was intense, and the fans were at the edge of their seats, waiting for the moment when everything would change.

And finally, after minutes of unrelenting action, the moment arrived during the 72nd minute. The players' hard work and determination paid off, and the game reached a new level of excitement.

Kingsley Coman cut into the pitch from the left wing as if his ass was on fire. He fed the ball past Ivan Rakitić, one of Barcelona's midfielders, before beating him for pace.

The Frenchman quickly approached the box and pulled the trigger from a position thirty yards away from the goal. He blasted the ball and sent it towards Barcelona's goal before any other opponent could close him down.

But luck seemed to elude Juventus again, and the ever-energetic Javier Mascherano threw himself forward and blocked the shot with his chest. The Barcelona man did his job perfectly for the umpteenth time during the game and sent the ball toward the left side of the box.

Jordi Alba, the Barcelona left-back who was 'just' returning from an attacking position, met the ball that had just been cleared by his defensive counterpart. The Spaniard wasted no time before turning around and unleashing a pass forward. He fed the ball along the touchline on the left flank and quickly found Neymar, Barcelona's left forward.

Yet another counterattack was on for Barcelona, and Neymar couldn't waste the opportunity. He sprinted along the touchline on the left before eventually cutting into the pitch and playing a brilliant forward pass toward Luis Suárez, his counterpart on Barcelona's offensive front.

That pass from Neymar was something else. The release was perfect and inviting for a talented forward like Luis Suárez. And, of course, the vampire in the box did what he usually did best.

Suárez timed his run well to escape the harassment from Leonardo Bonucci. He then expertly met the ball on the turn and unleashed a hell of a shot towards the goal from the edge of the box.

Luckily for Juventus, Buffon, the experienced keeper, did his job well once again. He dived the right way and punched the ball back into the pitch, hoping to save the day.

The Juventus players and fans were about to let out sighs of relief. But then again, another twist happened.

The ball punched by Buffon fell toward the just arriving Neymar, who did the needful. The Brazilian siphoned the momentum out of the ball with meticulous control before quickly ping-ponging it forward. He found the back of the net and scored Barcelona's fourth goal for the night during the 73rd minute.

"Merda! Porca miseria!" Buffon cursed. His face fell as he saw the Barcelona players sprinting towards the corner flag, arms raised in triumph.

The Juventus keeper had been filled with hope as his team had fought back from a three-goal deficit to narrow the gap to just one during the second half. But just when he thought they were about to pull off a sensational comeback, Barcelona hit them with a devastating counterattack and scored their fourth goal of the night.

Buffon could only shake his head in frustration and curse his team's bad luck. It was a bitter pill to swallow, but he knew they would have to regroup and come back stronger after the restart.

"Guys! Don't give up. Don't give up! We still have more than a quarter of an hour to play. We have time to score two more goals."

Zachary's voice suddenly sounded in Buffon's ears, further reminding the shot-stopper that they couldn't surrender yet. His spirits lifted, and the discouraged look disappeared from his face. Heart brimming with fighting spirit, he fetched the ball from the back of the net and threw it towards the center.

The already-waiting Carlos Tevez received the ball and placed it atop the center spot with all the haste he could muster. A minute later, when the Barcelona players finally finished celebrating, the game restarted with Juventus' kick-off.

With just the first few touches, everyone watching could tell that Juventus meant business. The Old Lady players showed their fighting spirit through their sharpness on the ball. And for the first time that evening, they played brilliant passes that wowed the spectators and pushed Barcelona back into its own half.

The game continued taking a strange turn, with the Italian giants using some of the tactics Barcelona had used against them during the first half. They avoided the crowded middle areas and relied on brilliant wing play from Kingsley and Pereyra to repeatedly bombard Barcelona's box with never-ending crosses.

The passage of play was on the side of Juventus, and as a result, Zachary's talent finally bloomed in great splendor. He remained on his toes, working hard on and off the ball, doing whatever he could to create opportunities until a sure chance finally came his way.

Everything started with Kingsley Coman, who was playing the football of his life. The Frenchman got to the end of a forward pass from Claudio Marchisio, and he sent a first-time cross towards the box from a position just a few meters away from the touchline.

Tevez, the striker lurking around the box, leaped high to meet the cross. But the ever-spirited Gerard Piqué won the aerial battle and cleared the danger with his head.

Fortunately for Juventus, the clearance wasn't the best, and Zachary managed to collect the second ball right at the edge of the box. Without waiting for anyone to close him down, he decided to pull the trigger. He skillfully unleashed a snap shot that deflected off Javier Mascherano's leg before homing into the back of the net.

Chapter 610 Boundless Fighting Spirit

Everyone watching couldn't believe it! Zachary had finally scored Juventus' 3rd goal and closed the score difference between the two teams to only one goal during the 78th minute of the game.

It was an incredible feat that pushed his Champions League goal tally for the season to a whopping 18 goals! And that was not all - he had finally surpassed Cristiano Ronaldo's record of 17 goals during the 2013-14 season. He was at the top of Europe, at least in terms of goals!

But Zachary didn't bask in the glory as his team was still trailing Barcelona by one goal. He knew there was still work to do. He quickly retrieved the ball from the back of the net and placed it on the center spot, ready to continue the game.

Juventus FC 3: FC Barcelona 4

"Wow, what a match we have here!" exclaimed Steve Bower, the commentator, as the Juventus fans erupted into cheers in the stadium. "Barcelona had a comfortable lead of three goals to nil before the end of the first half, but Juventus has come back in the second half with a vengeance and narrowed the score difference to just one goal!"

"Juventus has been playing some fantastic football, and it's now anyone's game with just over ten minutes left on the clock. Conor, who do you think will come out on top?" asked Bower eagerly.

"I couldn't tell you, Steve. This has been a rollercoaster of a match from start to finish," replied Conor McNamara, the other commentator. "I had my money on Barcelona at the start of the game, but Juventus has really surprised us with their fighting spirit, especially in the second half."

"During the first half, I obviously thought it would be an effortless win for Barcelona. They were leading by three goals at one point. But the Juventus players came out of the tunnel with boundless fighting spirit and proved me wrong. They quickly found the back of the net twice and narrowed the score difference to only one goal."

"The game was in their reach at that point, but then Barcelona scored the fourth goal. At that point, I thought this is it. I assumed the Catalans would manage the game well and freeze out Juventus for the remaining minutes. But here we are again, and Juventus has already netted the fourth. The result can go either way after all we've experienced."

"Speaking of which, Juventus is on the attack once again!" exclaimed Bower as the game resumed. "They're playing some really beautiful football, keeping possession with short passes and trying to break through Barcelona's defense."

"Pereyra has the ball now, and he's driving through the right wing. He's exchanging some quick passes with Zachary, and he's past Alba!" cried Bower excitedly. "He's heading straight towards the box, and he crosses the ball, looking for Tevez. But Ter Stegen, Barcelona's keeper, is there to punch the ball out of play for Juventus' corner kick! What a save!"

With just minutes left on the clock, it was impossible to predict which way the game would go. But as of now, Juventus had just won itself a crucial corner kick.

Imagine the scene: it was the 85th minute of the Champions League final, and Juventus was down three goals to four against Barcelona.

The tension was already palpable as both teams had fought tooth and nail to claim the most prestigious football title in Europe. The stadium was packed with passionate fans from all over the world, and every single one of them was on the edge of their seat, waiting for the result from the corner kick.

In a desperate bid to equalize, most Juventus players rushed into Barcelona's box, leaving only their shorter counterparts to guard against a counterattack. With the clock ticking down, they crowded the area, determined to outsmart their opponents and benefit from the corner kick.

Of course, the Barcelona players didn't allow them to do as they pleased as the final was on the line. The Catalans were aggressive and even caused a little scuffle within the box while defending their goal. Fortunately, the referee quickly resolved everything before blowing the whistle and signaling for Juventus to take the corner kick.

As Roberto Pereyra, the Juventus player waiting beside the corner flag, skillfully sent a lofted ball towards Barcelona's crowded box, chaos erupted in the box. Players pushed and pulled their opponents before leaping to meet the incoming goal. But then, out of nowhere, a silhouette in a Juventus jersey raced towards the near post.

It was Zachary, who had gone into motion after escaping his marker. He leaped off the ground as if gravity had no hold on him and angled his head to graze the incoming cross from the corner spot. His balance, coordination, and aerial finishing juju worked wonders as he timed his header to perfection and skillfully guided the ball towards the goal.

The whole series of events happened within an instant, and before the Barcelona keeper and defenders could react, the ball was already nestling into the back of the net.

GOAL!

86th minute! Juventus 4: Barcelona 4

Juventus had finally equalized, and the stadium erupted into thunderous cheers. The Juventus fans, who had been quiet for most of the game, were now on fire, jubilating their team's fourth and equalizing goal. They waved their flags and scarves, chanted their team's name, and hugged each other as if they had just won the lottery.

Zachary raced towards the stands, raising his fist to celebrate with all those excited fans. They responded with more pronounced cheers and continued jumping around as if they had achieved some sort of joyful salvation.

Soon enough, the other Juventus players and substitutes arrived to join the celebration. They hugged Zachary, patted him on the back, and shouted words of encouragement to each other. They even joked about how he had set a new unbreakable record for the most goals scored by a single player in a Champions League season.

But Giorgio Chiellini, the assistant captain, was quick to halt the celebrations. "Guys, we have only scored an equalizer," he reminded them. "Let's head back and fight for the Champions League trophy as a team. Let's score another goal and become the champions of Europe. We can do this! We can win the Champions League!"

The rest of the Juventus players made their agreements known with their loud yells. They bumped fists together and returned to the pitch with gazes brimming with boundless fighting spirit.

They were ready to battle Barcelona and score a goal during the remaining few minutes. They hoped to overwhelm their opponents and return to Turin with the most noble of European football titles.