

Greatest 571

Chapter 571 Excellent Game Management

The referee blew the whistle signaling the end of the first half after Zachary scored the second goal for Juventus. On cue, the players of both teams made a beeline for the tunnel for the halftime break.

On the way back to the dressing room, the jubilant Juventus players continually discussed the just concluded half. Some were joking around, while a few others were reviewing some of the moments from the game as they traversed the tunnel.

Patrice Evra suddenly approached Zachary and put an arm around his shoulders. "Zachary! That free kick was ingenious. We all thought you would go for the top corner, but you eventually went for a carpet shot. Was it your plan all along?"

"Nope!" Zachary responded with a smile. "I only changed my mind at the last moment for two reasons. One: I noticed that James Rodríguez, who was part of the defensive wall, was about to jump when I was going to take the free kick. Two: I watched Iker Casillas' body language and noticed that he was about to dive toward the direction I intended to target with the free-kick ball. So, I thought to myself: Why not go for a carpet shot under the wall to catch all of them by surprise?"

"Impressive! You managed to observe all those details at the last moment before you took the free kick!" Patrice Evra exclaimed. "Your awareness of details on the pitch is insane. Sergio Ramos must be cursing himself now for gifting that free kick to you."

Zachary smiled, feeling quite good about the free kick he had just converted. He had gambled and taken a different approach. Fortunately, his bet had paid off, and he had caught Iker Casillas and his defensive wall unawares to score the second goal with his carpet shot.

As the two men talked, they finally reached the dressing room. Together with the other players, they went through the halftime motions, including hydrating, listening to Coach Allegri's pep talk, and easing themselves. After finishing everything, they quickly exited the dressing room and returned to the pitch for the second half.

Amid the thunderous applause reverberating in the background, the referee blew the whistle, and the game resumed.

The second half started at a much more sedate pace, with Juventus keen to keep possession and resist conceding an equalizing goal. The players in the black and striped jerseys maintained a strict 4-3-1-2 formation as they played steady passes that allowed them to dictate the tempo.

They became the better team on the field of play for the next ten minutes. But due to their cautious style for the second half, they didn't create any remarkable goal-scoring chances.

The 55th minute arrived, and the Real Madrid players, who had only been second-best on the pitch, suddenly upped their game. They increased the pressure on Juventus' defense through a series of connected moments of brilliance from their incredible line-up of attack-minded players, like Cristiano Ronaldo, Gareth Bale, James Rodríguez, and Marcelo.

Desperate to grab another equalizer, they went all out to attack and create more chances. Eventually, Cristiano Ronaldo, Toni Kroos, and Chicharito, the substitute forward, all came close to scoring with clever efforts during the 61st, 68th, and 73rd minutes. But the brilliant goalkeeping antics by the experienced Gianluigi Buffon saved the day on all occasions and kept Juventus in the driving seat.

By then, everyone in the stadium could feel the game gradually slipping away from the Spanish giants as the 80th minute approached. But the Madrid-based team maintained their mindset of reigning champions. They continued committing numbers forward while patiently waiting for a chance to penetrate Juventus' defense.

Their hard work eventually paid off during the 84th minute when Gareth Bale made his presence known by dribbling past Patrice Evra and approaching the box from the right side. The Welshman then sent a tantalizing pass across the mouth of the goal, where Chicharito and Ronaldo were lurking.

However, the two Real Madrid attackers failed to connect with the pass, and the ball flashed past the goal area, eliciting gasps from the watching fans before continuing to the other side of the pitch.

Claudio Marchisio hurriedly collected the loose ball before it could head out of play on the right flank. He played a one-two with Stephan Lichtsteiner to skip past Marcelo before playing a forward pass to Andrea Pirlo.

Andrea Pirlo passed to Arturo Vidal, who also connected with Zachary through a lightning-fast exchange of short and accurate passes. The swift and brilliant passage of play then continued, with the Juventus midfielders flashing forward to counterattack against Real Madrid like a pack of wolves on the hunt.

The ball eventually returned to Zachary as he crossed the center line. He controlled it midstride and skipped past a sliding challenge from Sergio Ramos. He then continued darting through the middle like the speedster he was until he came across another obstacle in the form of Pepe at the border of the final third.

Zachary didn't choose to take on the no-nonsense defender. Instead, he quickly played a diagonal pass to his right to find Carlos Tevez, who had been running in sync with him.

The well-timed pass released Tevez just at the right moment before he could step into an offside position. A deft touch allowed the Argentine to go past Rapha?l Varane, the other Real Madrid center-back, before facing off against the keeper.

At that moment, everyone in the stadium expected Tevez to try his luck and go for glory. However, the experienced Tevez chose a different option. He didn't try to beat Casillas. But he instead squared the ball and found álvoro Morata, the substitute striker, who had just made a daring run on the other side of the box.

álvaro Morata, on his part, just remained composed and connected with the pass while unmarked and without any pressure. He completed one of the most effortless finishes in professional football by tapping the ball into the back of the empty net to score Juventus' 3rd goal for the night.

Juventus FC 3: Real Madrid 1

The cheers exploded into another thunderous peak of vocal chaos as álvoro Morata ran towards the touchline and celebrated the goal with his teammates. The Juventus fans started chanting victory slogans without a care for anything in the world. Their voices and stomping of their feet even caused slight tremors to course through the area.

"Mama Mia!" Carlo Zampa, the commentator, yelled at the top of his voice. "Another counterattack has allowed Juventus to pick the lock of the Madrid defense during the 85th minute. Álvaro Morata, the substitute who has just entered the game, has become yet another tormentor of Real Madrid today. He has scored the 3rd goal and given the Old Lady a huge boost in this UEFA Champions League quarter-final."

"This was a goal out of the blue," Sandro Piccinini, the other commentator, remarked. "For the last twenty minutes, we saw the Real Madrid players playing brilliant football and sustaining considerable pressure on Juventus' defense. They were even close to scoring an equalizer just moments ago. But after failing to capitalize on the opportunity, they have conceded another goal. I'm guessing that even the Juventus fans are surprised by the current score."

Carlo Zampa chuckled. "Football is a game that can change within seconds. But I'm also guessing it was part of Juventus' game plan to sit back and draw in the Real Madrid players. The Turin-based team obviously invited the pressure before getting the perfect chance to counterattack and score the third goal. Their management of the game has surely been excellent."

"The question now is what will Real Madrid do?" Sandro Piccinini questioned. "Will they play it safe and wait for the second leg before thinking about overturning this result? Or will they go all out and continue attacking to reduce the score difference?"

"Well," Carlo Zampa said. "Real Madrid are inherently an attack-minded team. They will likely continue attacking and trying to get another goal before the game concludes."

"That approach can open them up to more counters from Juventus," Sandro Piccinini said.

"Yes, that is true," Carlo Zampa agreed. "If Real Madrid goes all out to attack, they will be at constant risk of facing another counterattack. In fact, they might concede a 4th goal if they are not careful. But all that is the least of their concerns at the moment. I'm sure all the Real Madrid players and coaches should be racking their brains on how to get another goal before the final whistle. They have to do this to stand a chance against the on-form Juventus in the second leg of the quarter-final."

In the meantime, the match restarted, and as predicted by the commentators, Real Madrid went on the attack. They dominated possession, hunting for their second goal as the game ticked toward its conclusion.

Their attackers, like Cristiano Ronaldo and Gareth Bale, all tried to break into the box with their speed and creative footwork during the last three minutes of regular time. However, the untiring defensive duo of Giorgio Chiellini and Leonardo Bonucci continuously stopped most of their good attacking work, thus saving Juventus from taking any damage.

The only scare was when Javier Hernandez, aka Chicharito, took a heavy fall in the box in an attempt to win a penalty during the 90th minute. Fortunately for Juventus, the officials waved away the incident, and the game continued.

Nothing eventful happened after that, and the game fell into a steady rhythm as the Juventus players saw out the remaining time like the old-fashioned defensive unit they had always been. They stayed strong in possession and frustrated the opponents with time-wasting tactics until the referee eventually blew the final whistle to mark the end of the match.

Chapter 572 Interlude and Match Against Lazio

After taking a few interviews with reporters, Zachary returned to the dressing room. He showered and enjoyed dinner with all his teammates at the stadium, allowing himself to soak in the jubilatory mood of triumphing against Real Madrid for the first time in his career.

Then, after having his fill of the food and drinks, he said goodbye to his teammates and coaches before slowly making his way to the stadium exit. He repeatedly nodded at the guards and some of the night staff he met until he exited the tunnels and arrived at the parking lot.

Although it was close to midnight, a few fans and journalists were still camping beyond the barricades separating the player parking lot from the outside area. They all shouted and waved at Zachary when he slowly walked through the parking lot.

Zachary naturally waved back at them before ignoring them completely. He then quickly approached his Audi RS 7, eager to return to his mansion and rest for the night.

"Boss! You're back!" Lorenzo Riccardo, his bodyguard/driver, stepped out of the car and welcomed him. Without giving Zachary a chance to speak, he smiled and continued, "Congratulations on winning the match. Your performance was once again extraordinary."

"Thanks, Lorenzo." Zachary smiled and nodded. "But I'm quite tired. Let's head home immediately."

"Okay!" Lorenzo agreed and opened the door for him.

Zachary got into the back seat, and Lorenzo closed the door. The bodyguard then took his position on the steering wheel and eased the car out of Juventus Stadium's parking lot with expert familiarity. Before long, they joined the main road to Pinerolo, Piedmont, and speeded towards Zachary's mansion.

Zachary fell into a trance as the night scenery flashed outside the vehicle's window. His feelings slowly became a jumbled mess of pride and melancholy as he recalled all he had gone through over the past few years.

He had played in the academy in Norway only three years back. But within a short window, he had matured and joined one of Europe's top leagues.

He was now a proud Juventus player who had achieved incredible feats during his debut season. He had even just contributed to his team's victory against Real Madrid, which happened to be one of the strongest teams in Europe.

Zachary felt like he was walking on the clouds because of all the progress he had made in his career. But at the same time, he was also a bit sorrowful since he couldn't share all the results of his success with his late grandma, who had been the person that cared most about him in both of his lives.

"Bzzt Bzzzt! Bzzt Bzzzt!"

Zachary's phone suddenly vibrated and broke him out of his trance. He fished it out of his pocket and glanced at the screen. His expression softened on seeing that it was another person who really cared about him. He pressed the accept button and held the phone against his ear.

"Hello, Emily," he said. "You haven't gone to bed yet?"

Emily chuckled from the other side of the line. "How can I go to bed when my most important client is still busy working? Anyways, we left the stadium only about forty minutes ago. I'm now enjoying dinner with Kristin before returning to my hotel room for the night."

"Oh! Why didn't you invite me? I would have loved to have dinner with the two of you."

"How could we dare to take you away from your teammates right after the match?" Emily questioned. "By the way, Kristin is saying hi. Aside from that, congratulation on winning the first leg of the Champions League quarter-final. And congratulations on overpowering Real Madrid for the first time in your career."

Zachary beamed. "Thanks. And say hi to Kristin. Thank her on my behalf for doing great work on the publicity side before the game."

"Okay," Emily said, and then there were a few seconds of silence before her voice sounded again. "Zachary! Do you remember the Nike deal I told you about?"

"Yes. I remember you saying something about Nike proposing a ten-year-long endorsement deal with many attractive benefits."

"That's the one," Emily said. "The Nike representatives have finally come through with a great offer. They recently forwarded the proposal with incredible endorsement terms to me. If you partner with them, you could earn a potential annual income of 15 to 20 million Euros within a few years."

"Oh!" Zachary's heart skipped a beat. He was obviously very interested in the deal. The only problem was that the timing wasn't right since he couldn't divert his attention from football at that juncture. He couldn't afford to focus on other things when the UEFA Champions League trophy was still in the balance.

"I'm proposing that we meet and discuss the terms further," Emily suggested from the other side of the line. "What do you think?"

"I think we should postpone everything to do with this deal."

"Oh!" Emily exclaimed, clearly surprised. "I can say that this is a deal Zachary took a few seconds to organize his thoughts before saying, "I think we should postpone everything to do with this deal."

"Oh!" Emily exclaimed, clearly surprised. "I can say that this is a deal that only the best sports personalities can receive. Why aren't you interested?"

"Don't get me wrong," Zachary hurriedly said. "I'm very interested in the deal. But the timing isn't right since all my focus will be on the Champions League for the next few weeks. I wish to give my all to help my team to attain European glory. So, I can't afford any distractions at this juncture."

"Oh, so that is the case," Emily said, sighing with relief. "I get you now. Your football career is, of course, the priority. It's the only thing attracting all these famous companies to invest in you. So, go ahead and do what you ought to do to attain more glory in your football career."

"Thanks for understanding," Zachary replied. "But what about the potential deal with Nike? How do we handle it now?"

"Well, Nike is a sports company. They should understand that sports professionals must focus and go all out to win tournaments. I'll talk to them and ensure that they understand your position. We can then postpone all the negotiations to June after you're free from your team's Champions League obligations."

"Thanks again," Zachary said. "You're the best."

"You're welcome," Emily replied. "Before I forget, I should also inform you that Miss Heather Miller finished all the groundwork to set up your company. But I'm guessing you won't have time to finalize the process."

"Sorry, but that's really the case," Zachary said. "For now, I'll only spend all my time preparing for the Champions League, the Coppa Italia, and the remaining games of the Serie A. So, let's postpone everything outside football to June after we finish the current football season."

"Okay, let's do that," Emily promised. "I have to say good night now. If there's nothing else, I'll be hanging up."

"Goodnight to you, too. And thanks for calling," Zachary said and ended the call. He then leaned back into the seat and continued enjoying the ride back to his mansion in Pinerolo, Piedmont.

The Juventus players only took a day off before returning to training. They headed to the Vinovo, Juventus training center, on Thursday morning to commence preparations for their upcoming Serie A game against Lazio.

Meanwhile, all the other first-leg Champions League quarter-final games had concluded over the previous two nights. Borussia Dortmund defeated AS Monaco at home by a score of 1:0. Barcelona then overwhelmed Paris Saint-Germain by a score of 4:1, even while playing at an away ground. And lastly, FC Porto thrashed Bayern Munich with a score of 3:1 at their home stadium in Portugal.

All the Juventus players, including Zachary, had already learned about the results by Thursday morning. But they didn't give the info much attention, especially since they were already in training mode to prepare for their next two fixtures.

Under the supervision of the Juventus coaches, they gave their all on Thursday and Friday. They went through targeted fitness routines and strict tactical drills while simultaneously preparing for their games against Lazio and Real Madrid.

Time flashed by, and Saturday evening eventually arrived. The Juventus players, who had already won the title, returned to their home stadium to face off against Lazio in their 31st Serie A fixture of the season.

With Wednesday's crucial away game against Real Madrid in mind, Coach Max Allegri rested most of his star players. He left the likes of Zachary, Carlos Teves, Andrea Pirlo, Arturo Vidal, Claudio Marchisio, and Stephan Lichtsteiner on the bench. He only fielded a squad filled with many second-stringers.

The result was the game turning into a tricky hassle, with Juventus struggling to match Lazio's intensity during the first half. The defense even made a mistake and allowed Miroslav Klose, Lazio's center forward, to score the opening goal during the 42nd minute.

Fortunately, the Juventus players on the field responded appropriately and got the goal back through Fernando Llorente during the 72nd minute. They then played a tenacious defensive game that repeatedly stopped the tricky Lazio side from scoring more goals for the rest of the game.

And with that, Juventus avoided a loss yet again by securing an acceptable 1:1 draw, even in the absence of most of their first-team players. Moreover, they had also pushed their season tally to 87 points and increased their point difference with the second-placed AS Roma to a whopping 29 points.

They were obviously flying as a team, and no one in Italy could stop them. They thus turned all their attention to the upcoming UEFA Champions League second-leg fixture with all the confidence and momentum they had accumulated over the weekend.

Chapter 573 Second Leg of the UEFA Champions League Quarter-Final

Wednesday, April 22nd, 2015

Santiago Bernabéu Stadium, Madrid, Spain.

Time: 7:30 PM.

Juventus' team bus snaked through the route crowded with yelling supporters and arrived at the famous Bernabéu Stadium. It parked within the designated area after the gates, and the doors opened amid thunderous applause.

The players and coaches started alighting from the vehicle, causing a commotion. Cheers hit a thunderous crescendo, and cameras flashed at the speed of bullets fired from a machine gun as the excited supporters and journalists tried to take photographs of the famous team from Turin.

"This is surprising. We have a lot of fans here," Zachary, who was among the last players to exit the bus, exclaimed. He could see many people sporting Juventus' stripped black and white jerseys around the route leading further into the stadium gates. They were all shouting and holding their smartphones up to take photographs of the players.

"A few of these fans are Italians living in Madrid," Patrice Evra, who was walking beside him, remarked. "However, most others are our supporters from Turin who have traveled all the way here to support us. They would obviously not miss tonight's crucial match, which will determine whether or not we qualify for the UEFA Champions League semi-final."

"It's great that they are here," Zachary said. "Otherwise, we might have been overwhelmed by all these Real Madrid fans crowding around the place."

"True!" Evra smiled and walked towards the stairs leading further into the stadium.

Zachary waved to some of the fans, who were continuously yelling his name, and continued following his teammates and coaches. He passed through a wide entrance and left the chaos behind before eventually entering the tunnel to the dressing room.

His ears soon picked up the thunderous cheers of those fans who had already entered the stadium. His blood boiled with a blend of both excitement and anxiety as he traversed the tunnel.

It would be the first time he would play a match against Real Madrid in their world-famous home ground of Santiago Bernabéu. Everything around, including the opposing fans and the atmosphere within the place, was a bit alien and overwhelming. He couldn't stop his heart from racing in anticipation of the action about to commence.

After walking for a few minutes, the Juventus players arrived in the visitor's dressing room of the Santiago Bernabéu Stadium. Everything was ready and prepared. Juventus' all-blue jerseys for that day had already been neatly folded and placed on the benches around the room. The only thing remaining was for the players to put them on before heading to the pitch for the match.

However, that was for minutes later, as the players had to undergo the mandatory and necessary pre-match warm-up before focusing on anything else.

The Juventus players were as professional as ever on that front. Without even waiting for the instructions from their coaches, they quickly started on their pre-match routines. They were almost in autopilot mode as they went through the dynamic warm-ups before returning to the dressing room and donning their all-blue jerseys for the match.

At that point, Coach Max Allegri took center stage and gave his pre-match pep talk. He didn't delve into much of the tactics since he had explained the game plan only hours prior. Instead, he talked about the need for teamwork, fighting spirit, courage, hard work, and brilliant decision-making on the field of play before sending his players to the pitch for the game.

It was already 8:35 PM by then. There were only ten minutes remaining before the scheduled kick-off time for the second leg of the UEFA Champions League quarter-final between Juventus and Real Madrid.

The fans of both teams had already taken up all the seats in the stadium. They sang and cheered at the top of their voices as the players walked onto the pitch and lined up in front of the tunnel. Their voices caused the atmosphere to become super-charged as the time for kick-off slowly approached.

Zachary took it in all as he went through the pre-match routines. He allowed the tension to build up within him as he went through the singing of the Champions League anthem.

Yes, he was a bit nervous. But he was likewise fit and in top shape. He had also received special instructions from his head coach that allowed him to remain confident. What remained was for him to do his best and utilize all his skills to execute his part of Juventus' game plan after the game commenced.

The referee blew the whistle on time, and the game kicked off.

The Real Madrid fans, who understood that their men needed to overturn a 3:1 deficit from the first leg, immediately went all out to support their team. Their voices were loud enough to smother any other noise in the stadium. Even the match commentator couldn't get his commentary through the bluster.

Coach Allegri took in all the cheers calmly and focused on the game. But a few minutes later, he couldn't help but frown when he noticed Real Madrid dominating the early stages. The opponents had even conquered the midfield and were already dictating the tempo.

"Our players are lacking sharpness," he said to Maurizio Trombetta, his assistant. "They are allowing Real Madrid a lot of freedom on the ball."

"Indeed," Maurizio Trombetta replied. "Pirlo, Vidal, Marchisio, and even Zachary all seem out of sorts. They are always a second late while closing down the Real Madrid midfielders."

Coach Max Allegri nodded and continued watching the game. He had already noticed that Carlo Ancelotti had gone with a 4-3-3 attacking formation. The Italian tactician had played Isco, James Rodríguez, and Toni Kroos in a triangular-shaped midfield. Those three were brilliant. They were already causing Juventus many problems during the opening ten minutes.

In defense, Carlo Ancelotti had gone with four defenders, including Marcelo, Sergio Ramos, Varane, and Daniel Carvajal. These four were quite solid at the back. They had sealed the door shut and stopped Juventus from playing forward balls.

Lastly, Cristiano Ronaldo, Karim Benzema, and Gareth Bale were on the attack to complete Real Madrid's 4-3-3 attacking formation. Each of the three had already shown sparks of brilliance in the opening ten minutes. And if the Juventus players remained careless, they could suffer their wrath at any moment.

"The situation doesn't look good," Maurizio Trombetta, the assistant coach, said from the side. "Should we make a few changes to our plans?"

"No." Max Allegri shook his head. "It's still too early. Let's give the boys some time to settle into the game."

In the meantime, twelve minutes went by silently as the game continued. The Madrid fans didn't lose hope, though. They continued cheering on their team, hoping for a miracle. They used loud voices to encourage their players to give their all to get an opening goal.

Their voices seemed to achieve a positive effect within less than a quarter of an hour. The Madrid players responded to the raucous crowd by flying out of the traps and launching endless attacks against Juventus' defense.

The reigning champions then built up on the momentum. They set a blistering early tempo and overpowered Juventus in all areas of the field. Their passes connected with a clockwork rhythm as they advanced through the ranks. Soon enough, they started creating chances at the goal, with Gareth Bale eventually coming close to scoring during the 16th minute.

This all started with a well-timed through-pass from Toni Kroos that released the Welshman, allowing him to blast forward like a Tsunami. Gareth Bale then used his pace to fly past Patrice Evra before breaking into the box and shooting from a tight angle.

Fortunately for Juventus, Buffon was on form again. He reacted by punching the ball out of play for a corner kick. And with that, he saved Juventus from conceding the opening goal on the night during the 16th minute.

All the Real Madrid players, including the central defenders - Sergio Ramos and Varane, came forward and crowded into the box. They were obviously looking for a chance to overturn the deficit from the first leg. The corner kick was such an opportunity they had been waiting for.

FWEEEEEEE

The referee blew the whistle, and Isco took action. The Real Madrid midfielder sent a brilliant cross into the crowded box from the corner spot.

The incoming ball caused chaos to descend into the area before the goal. Players of opposing teams were shoving and pulling each other. They all fought with their all, hoping to gain aerial superiority before meeting the fast-approaching corner ball.

Fortunately for Juventus, it was Giorgio Chiellini who came out on top. The untiring Juventus center-back towered over James Rodriguez and a few surrounding players before clearing the danger. He successfully headed the ball towards the left side of the pitch and saved his team from another precarious situation.

FWEEEEEEE

Just as the Juventus players, coaches, and fans began to relax, the whistle sounded. All eyes and cameras turned towards the referee, who was already pointing at the penalty spot. Moreover, the official didn't stop at that. But he also showed a yellow card to Giorgio Chiellini, who clearly couldn't make sense of what was transpiring.

What happened?

Zachary took it in all with a dazed expression. A moment ago, his team had successfully defended a corner and were about to launch their counterattack. But within seconds, everything had gone upside down, and they conceded a penalty.

It wasn't good news for Juventus. It was the worst situation possible in a second-leg game of the UEFA Champions League quarter-final, especially since Real Madrid could capitalize on the penalty to reduce the 3:1 aggregate score difference to only one goal.

Chapter 574 Clinging On

The cheers rose to another thunderous peak after the referee awarded Real Madrid a penalty. The home fans couldn't hide their excitement. Their shouting and yelling caused an explosive atmosphere around the Santiago Bernabéu Stadium.

"Well, well, well," Rob Daly, one of the commentators, said. "We have gotten ourselves some early drama in the game. The referee has just awarded Real Madrid a penalty. The Los Blancos now have the perfect start for the second leg of this UEFA Champions League quarter-final. Should they convert, they will trim the 3:1 deficit from the first leg to only a single goal."

"The replay has just come in, and I can now see why the referee decided to award the penalty," Andy Brassell, the other commentator, said. "Giorgio Chiellini clearly manhandled and pulled down James Rodriguez before heading away the corner ball. Some referees usually don't penalize such fouls with penalties since everyone is fighting with their all to get to the incoming ball. But Jonas Eriksson, today's referee, has taken a harsh stand."

"Yes, he has, and I think he has the grounds to make such a decision," Rob Daly said. "Giorgio Chiellini clearly made a clumsy foul and invited the decision. He has to face the consequences with his teammates for using foul means to outwit the opponent while within the box."

In the meantime, Cristiano Ronaldo had stepped forward to take the penalty. The Real Madrid man made no mistake on the spot. He blasted the ball down the middle and found the back of the net to score Real Madrid's 1st goal on the night.

The score was then 1:0 in favor of Real Madrid for the night. But the aggregate score for the quarter-final remained 3:2 in favor of Juventus. As such, Juventus was still the team in the driving seat, and if the status quo remained the same, they would be the ones to qualify for the semis.

The Real Madrid fans knew all this. They wasted no time before using loud voices to cheer on their team. They shouted chants of support when their team had the ball and then booed with untiring dynamism when Juventus was in possession.

In the meantime, the Real Madrid players were also doing their part to make a comeback. Buoyed by the goal they had just scored, they roared forward and continued launching lethal attacks against Juventus' defense. They relied on exceptional wing-play tactics and through balls from their midfielders to continue creating clear-cut goal-scoring chances.

In particular, Cristiano Ronaldo was an imminent threat on the counterattack and even came close to scoring twice. But surprisingly, he squandered his chances, once when he opted to pass instead of shooting from eight yards out during the 34th minute and again during the 42nd minute when he lashed wide from the edge of the penalty area after a mesmeric first touch.

After that, Juventus somehow clung on until halftime without conceding another goal against the spirited Real Madrid team. But that was at the cost of all their players, including Tevez and Zachary, falling back in their half to defend.

With how the Juventus players had just performed, the atmosphere was somber within their dressing room at halftime. Even the often-hyper players, like Patrice Evra and Arturo Vidal, remained silent. They didn't let out even a squeak as they waited for their coach to take center stage.

Coach Max Allegri looked at his players, who were clearly in low spirits, and shook his head. "Listen," he said. "We all need to forget our performance during the first half. We must now start thinking about how to handle the second half."

"I know that playing against a team like Real Madrid at their home ground is difficult. It's even more so with all their home fans, who are constantly booing us whenever we're in possession. But as professional footballers playing for Juventus, we have to overcome this. We must stay calm and quickly settle down in the game. We must lose all the pressure and start playing at our best."

Coach Allegri swept his gaze across the dressing room. "During the second half, Real Madrid will continue attacking us and trying to score another goal. They will commit more men forward and try to get that equalizer to tie the aggregate score."

"But what will we do? We'll remain solid both in midfield and back. We'll hold possession when possible. But if the going gets hard, we'll all fall back and defend. We'll absorb the pressure and do our best not to concede another goal."

"You must all not get anxious when we're doing this. I'm sure that even if we're on the defensive 80% of the time, we'll still get a few opportunities to threaten them, especially on the counter. Those who get hold of the chances must remain composed and convert them. This is how we'll win the quarters and qualify for the Champions League semi-finals. Understood?"

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

"Understood?" The coach asked again with a louder voice.

"Yes, coach," The players yelled back with more energetic voices.

"Good," the coach said with a smile. He then gave special instructions to players like Zachary, Tevez, and Andrea Pirlo. After concluding everything, he sent his players back to the pitch for the second half of the UEFA Champions League quarter-final second-leg match.

The Juventus players started the second half much better than they did during the first. They followed their coach's instructions and remained solid and compact while performing their defensive and midfield maneuvers. They maintained a strict 4-3-1-2 formation that allowed them to seal the door on the Los Blancos and prevent them from finding any spaces through the middle.

Off course, Carlo Ancelotti's men soon found a solution to this tactical ploy. They expanded the pitch width with Cristiano Ronaldo and Gareth Bale going further into the wings. Aside from that, their two wing-backs (Marcelo and Daniel Carvajal) started taking a riskier approach by floating forward to overload the flanks.

With the strategy, Real Madrid was back in business within a few minutes. They relied on their phenomenal wingers to make runs into Juventus' half before floating crosses to Karim Benzema, the center forward. And if that failed, the flank players, be it Marcelo, Ronaldo, Bale, or Carvajal, would square the ball to find the midfielders or cut into the pitch and race towards the box themselves.

Their brilliance eventually paid off, and they created a clear goal-scoring chance during the 62nd minute when Cristiano Ronaldo showcased his class by skipping past Stephan Lichtsteiner. The Real Madrid ace side-stepped past the Juventus defender with spellbinding footwork before approaching the box from the left side. Ronaldo then sent an inviting cross across the goal mouth, where Karim Benzema happened to be arriving.

Karim Benzema, on his part, outjumped Giorgio Chiellini, the defender who was a bit too careful because of the yellow card he had previously received. Benzema then met the incoming cross with a header and sent the ball towards the goal from a tight angle.

Fortunately for Juventus, the experienced Gianluigi Buffon was alert again. The goalkeeper reacted appropriately and punched the ball out of play for a corner kick. And with that, he saved Juventus from conceding the second goal on the night during the 63rd minute.

All the Real Madrid players, including Varane, Sergio Ramos, and Kroos, crowded in the box again after the referee awarded the corner kick. They all started moving around the area while anticipating the corner ball.

It was at that time that the referee blew the whistle. On cue, Isco, the Real Madrid midfielder, took the corner kick and sent a curling cross towards the box.

Chaos immediately exploded within the box as the players of both teams tried to outwit their opponents and meet the corner ball. But at the end of it all, Leonardo Bonucci was the person to come out on top.

The Juventus central defender towered over everyone in the box before clearing the danger. He beat Varane in a battle of aerial superiority and sent the ball towards the center.

Zachary, who had also been defending the corner, reacted instantaneously. He took off from the box and chased after the ball that was heading towards Rodríguez.

He hit top speed within seconds and managed to reach it just as Rodríguez was about to control it. He stretched out his leg ever so slightly, and with the simplest of deft touches, he pickpocketed the Real Madrid man.

Heart racing, he circumvented Rodríguez, who was attempting to pull his shirt, before realizing that the pitch before him had opened up. He was even more surprised when he noticed that aside from Iker Casillas, the keeper, he couldn't see any other Real Madrid player between him and the goal.

Adrenaline immediately coursed through Zachary's system, and he accelerated. He pumped his feet like the pistons of a speeding race car and bolted through the middle of the pitch.

The scenery around him flashed by quickly as he ran, and soon, he met Iker Casillas, who had come out of the goal to greet him. He remained composed and rounded the keeper with a few deft touches coupled with a swift change of pace before dashing forward and hammering the ball into the back of the empty net.

But even then, he didn't halt or slow down. Instead, he ran around the goal and dashed toward the corner flag while enjoying the thunderous cheers of the visiting Juventus fans in the stands. And lastly, he slid on his knees for a few meters and punched the air to celebrate the goal.

lastly, he slid on his knees for a few meters and punched the air to celebrate the goal.

He was happy. He felt fulfilled after scoring a crucial goal that could seal his team's qualification to that year's UEFA Champions League semis.

Chapter 575 The Italian Defensive Game at Work

"GOAL!" Rob Daly, the commentator, yelled as Zachary moved to celebrate with his teammates. "He has done it again. Zachary Bemba has scored his 16th goal in this year's Champions League season. He robbed James Rodríguez and went clean through from the halfway line. Nobody could keep up with him, and he bided his time and waited and waited before rounding Iker Casillas and slotting the ball into the back of the net."

"What pace! What skills! What composure! This is the Zachary we have all come to know, love, and fear. He's often the savior of his team and the nemesis of all opposing teams. He is an exceptional young talent who can make something happen from nothing. With just one counterattack and bam, he scored a crucial goal for Juventus during the 65th minute. He got the equalizer on the night and extended Juventus' aggregate score to 4:2."

"His goal might have even won the quarter-final for Juventus," Andy Brassell, the other commentator, said. "Only 25 minutes remain before the end of the game. I don't see any chance of Real Madrid overturning this 4:2 aggregate score, especially against a team as defensively disciplined as Juventus."

Rob Daly sighed. "The Real Madrid players have tried their best. They have been exceptional on the pitch and created many goal-scoring chances against Juventus. There was even a moment towards the end of the first half when I thought they would get the equalizer and tie the aggregate score of this quarter-final. But one counterattack from Juventus has changed everything, and they now have to overturn a deficit of two goals or face elimination from the Champions League."

"Well, this is football," Andy Brassell said. "Games can change within seconds. Moreover, there were always signs of Juventus breaking away since the start of the second half. The more men Real Madrid committed forward, the more they increased their risk of facing a counterattack. The poorly taken corner finally did them in. A superb clearance header by Leonardo Bonucci and some sluggish defensive play from James Rodríguez was all it took for Zachary to break through and punish the Los Blancos on the counter."

"That's true," Rob Daly agreed. "Now we have to ask ourselves the same old question: What will Real Madrid do after conceding the goal?"

Andy Brassell chuckled. "They are already behind by two goals in this quarter-final. They have no choice but to throw caution to the wind and go full out on the attack. They will have to find a way to score two goals in these remaining twenty-something minutes or risk elimination from this Champions League."

"Indeed," Rob Daly said. "There is no choice but to go all out on the attack in their case. But this could gift Juventus more opportunities to counterattack."

"Maybe, maybe not," Andy Brassell said.

Real Madrid 1 (2): Juventus 1 (4)

Coach Max Allegri took another glance at the jumbotron hanging on one side of the Santiago Bernabéu Stadium and nodded to himself. His boys had finally done what they ought to do.

They had remained solid and avoided conceding a goal, and when the chance came, they hit Real Madrid on the counterattack and got that crucial goal. They were now firmly in the driving seat of this UEFA Champions League quarter-final.

Coach Max Allegri could feel eruptions of hope and joy exploding in his mind. But he used his experience and forced himself to remain calm. He returned his gaze to the pitch where the game had just recommenced.

Real Madrid had already reacted as expected. They had already committed more numbers forward, and almost all the players in the team, save for Varane and Iker Casillas, had pushed forward into Juventus' half. They were all going at full throttle to break down Juventus' tenacity. They were using everything in

their arsenal to get a goal and have some hope of overturning the two-goal deficit before the final whistle sounded.

Coach Max Allegri remained calm and turned towards Real Madrid's bench. As expected, he saw Carlo Ancelotti and his assistants prepping Chicharito as a substitute.

The Italian tactician was probably about to bet all his chips by having his team go all out on the offensive front during the remaining minutes. In fact, Coach Allegri wouldn't be surprised if the tactician sacrificed some of his defense for more firepower on the striking line.

"Well, don't you wish to attack?" Coach Max Allegri thought to himself. "Let me humor you and allow you to attack however you want by going on the defensive."

Coach Max Allegri was a typical Italian Coach. He wouldn't do something as needless as encouraging his team to continue going all out on the attack when they had a two-goal advantage against a team like Real Madrid with only twenty minutes remaining.

He would instead stick to his basics and frustrate the opponents with the Italian defensive game. He would play it safe and see his team through to the semis without taking unnecessary risks.

As the considerations flashed in his head, he turned towards his bench. His eyes swept over all his substitutes until they settled on one of his most solid defensive players outside his starting eleven. "Andrea Barzagli," he called out. "Get ready to replace Morata. I want you on the pitch in less than five minutes."

"Yes, coach," Barzagli replied. He immediately put on his gear and ran off to warm up.

Coach Allegri then considered how Andrea Pirlo was getting tired in midfield. He turned to another substitute who had some good pace and stamina. "Roberto Pereyra, you should also get ready. I want you to replace Pirlo within five minutes tops."

"Yes, coach," Roberto Pereyra replied before dressing up and running away for the warm-up.

Coach Max Allegri nodded to himself. He returned his gaze to the pitch, where his team was still under pressure.

Gareth Bale had just exchanged a series of quick one-twos with Daniel Carvajal to break past Patrice Evra and approach the box from the right wing. Bale then drove into the box without slowing down before squaring a pass into the middle.

Coach Max Allegri watched it all and felt his heart rising into his throat. He was like a tense string as he noticed Karim Benzema connecting with the intricate pass from Bale before hammering it. Fortunately, Gianluigi Buffon, the ever-reliable captain, was alert again. He dived and went on a full stretch before getting a goalward with a first-time swing.

Fortunately, Gianluigi Buffon, the ever-reliable captain, was alert again. He dived and went on a full stretch before getting a well-timed hand onto the ball. He pushed it slightly off its intended course, forcing it to miss the post by mere inches before going out of play.

"This can't go on."

Coach Max Allegri expelled a breath he didn't know he had been holding. He turned to his assistants and told them to notify Andrea Barzagli and Roberto Pereyra to hurry their preparations. He wanted to get them on the pitch to calm the situation before it was too late.

The ball went out of play for a Real Madrid throw-in during the 71st minute. On cue, the fourth official raised the board, and the two Juventus substitutes entered the game. They took their positions in defense and midfield, thus changing Juventus' playing formation into a 5-4-1 system.

With the addition of the two pairs of fresh legs, the Juventus team quickly settled down. They became even more solid in defense and midfield, with more capacity to absorb more pressure. They continued playing a defensive game, with all players falling back into their half to protect their two-goal advantage during the remaining minutes.

Of course, Real Madrid didn't go down without fighting. The Los Blancos started playing long balls and crosses to their strikers in the box to bypass the overwhelming numbers in Juventus' midfield and defense. Aside from that, the midfielders, like Toni Kroos and Isco, also began trying their luck with shots from way outside the eighteen, hoping that the keeper would spill the ball and present a chance to score to one of their forwards.

They were really going out to get a goal and get back into the game during the final minutes. But try as they had, Real couldn't breach Juventus' impenetrable backline. Most of their attempts went wide, while the ever-reliable Buffon calmly dealt with the ones that somehow found the target.

In that manner, the minutes passed, and the 90th minute approached. By then, the Juventus players, including Zachary and Tevez, were already in the zone, playing a true-blue Italian defensive game.

They held possession when possible, fell back when needed, wasted time when there was an opportunity, and avoided the temptation of doing something as needless as launching more attacks. They remained disciplined and continued seeing out the final embers of the quarter-final with minimal fuss.

Eventually, the five minutes of added time also elapsed, and the referee finally blew the long-awaited whistle. And with that, the Juventus players finally sealed the deal and won the 2014/15 Champions League quarter-final with an aggregate score of 4:2.

They had taken another step toward achieving European glory, and that left all their fans beyond themselves with excitement.

Chapter 576 UCL Quarter-Finals Wrap-up

A very odd atmosphere had descended over the Santiago Bernabéu Stadium with the sound of the final whistle.

The Real Madrid fans were quiet as they digested the bitter reality of their team's elimination from the UEFA Champions League. Their faces were glum, and some were even crying. Others were holding their hands behind their heads, just like a group of mourners at the funeral of one of their close ones.

On the contrary, the Juventus fans were at the zenith of their joy after witnessing their team overcome the reigning champions and eliminate them from Europe's most prestigious competition. They had taken over the Santiago Bernabéu and were constantly singing and yelling at the top of their voices.

Such scenes were what Zachary saw as he moved around the pitch to celebrate with his teammates after the heated quarter-final game. A wide smile had already outlined his facial features, and he felt he was at the peak of life. He couldn't contain his happiness after eliminating a team as strong as Real Madrid from the Champions League.

"Congratulations upon putting up another exceptional performance tonight," a reporter said after abruptly shoving a microphone into his face. "How do you feel after eliminating the reigning champions and qualifying for the semis?"

"Happy, of course," Zachary replied, the smile never leaving his face. "The game was tricky, and we were on the back foot for a long time. But I'm still satisfied with what we did. Yes, the first half was tough, and we even conceded a goal. But we changed for the better during the second half and played a solid game. We got the required result and won the game. Now, we can begin preparing for the semis."

The reporter smiled and nodded. "You got your 16th goal for this Champions League campaign. You're only one goal shot from equaling the record Ronaldo set last year after he found the back of the net seventeen times to become the player with the highest number of goals ever in a single Champions League season. Do you have the confidence to break or surpass this record?"

"I'm not sure," Zachary said. "Scoring goals sometimes depends on luck. Sometimes, it's your day, and you will effortlessly find the back of the net. Other times, you can try dozens of times and still fail to put the ball in the back of the net. So, I don't know whether or not I will score in the upcoming semis. But I'm confident that I'll do my best to help Juventus win the next stage of the Champions League."

"Zachary, thanks for answering my questions," the reporter said with a smile. "And congratulations again upon qualifying for the UEFA Champions League semi-finals. I wish you the best in your upcoming matches."

Zachary nodded and shook hands with the reporter. After saying his goodbyes, he walked away and followed his still-jubilant teammates and coaches to the dressing room.

Meanwhile, BT Sport's UEFA Champions League wrap-up show had just commenced. The main presenter was Gary Lineker, and with him were the three pundits - Michael Owen, Rio Ferdinand, and Steven Gerrard.

Gary Lineker waited for the broadcast from the Santiago Bernabéu Stadium to end before smiling at the cameras and saying, "Our dear viewers! That was Zachary Bemba, the match winner, speaking to one of our reporters at the Santiago Bernabéu. For those just joining us, he's the one who scored Juventus' goal on the night and helped them secure their qualification for the Champions League semi-finals."

"What a game we just had!" His smile widened, and he turned to glance at the pundits for the game. "Gentlemen! Let's start with Zachary Bemba's performance in the quarter-final. He scored a landmark 16th goal for this Champions League campaign. He's only one away from equaling Cristiano's record of the most goals in a season. Do you see him getting this goal and putting his name in the record books?"

Michael Owen smiled. "Zachary Bemba has been brilliant over the past few games. He's a player who is always hungry and eager to score whenever he's on the pitch. He will get the goal in one way or another and equal the record. He might even get two and surpass the record."

"I can't dispute that." Rio Ferdinand grinned. "Zachary is a brilliant player in and out. Tonight, we saw for ourselves what he can do with even a single opportunity. He's one player who can create something out of nothing. I would instead be surprised if he failed to find the back of the net over the two legs of the semi-final."

"That brings us to our next question." Gary Lineker smiled. "Does he make the Ballon d'Or shortlist for this season?"

"That's a no-brainer," Michael Owen said. "He will be on the shortlist, and he will be one of the top contenders. In fact, he might as well go home with the prize if he can score a few more goals and help Juventus win the Champions League."

"I agree with Michael on this one," Steven Gerrard said. "Zachary Bemba has already made plenty of contributions towards Juventus' successful defense of their Serie A title. He has also scored more than fifty goals in all competitions this season. If his team can win the Champions League, the Ballon d'Or could be his for the taking."

"Well," Gary Lineker said. "Before we continue discussing the quarter-finals, let's look at the results from the other fixtures."

As his voice sounded, the camera crew quickly changed the pictures on the big screens to the results of the other Champions League quarter-final fixtures.

UCL Quarter-final Results

Played on Tuesday, April 21, 2015

->Bayern Munich 6 (7) - (4) 1 FC Porto

->Barcelona 2 (6) - (1) 0 Paris Saint-Germain

Played on Wednesday, April 22, 2015

->Real Madrid 1 (2) - (4) 1 Juventus FC

->AS Monaco 1 (1) - (2) 1 Borussia Dortmund

*Results in brackets are the aggregate scores over the two legs.

"The surprise for the weak was Bayern Munich," Gary Lineker spoke while the results were still showing on the screens. "The German champions overcame a two-goal deficit from the first leg to win the quarter-final by an aggregate score of 7:4."

"Barcelona also performed as usual and defeated Paris Saint-Germain 2:0 on the night to win the quarters by an aggregate score of 6:1. The match between Monaco and Borussia Dortmund was full of ups and downs, with the French team being the first to find the back of the net. But Dortmund eventually got the better of Monaco by scoring an equalizer late in the game."

"We now have ourselves two great semi-final fixtures to look forward to. Juventus will face Borussia Dortmund, with the first leg of the semis in Turin. On the other hand, Barcelona will battle Bayern Munich in the other semi-final, with the first leg at the Camp Nou in Spain."

"Wow!" Michael Owen chimed in. "The battle between Barcelona and Bayern Munich is going to be a huge one. One side has the free-scoring trio of Neymar, Suárez, and Messi, while the other has Robert Lewandowski and Thomas Müller. The midfield face-off between Barcelona's Busquets, Rakitic, and Iniesta, as they clash with Bayern Munich's Xabi Alonso, Bastian Schweinsteiger, and Thiago Alcántara, will also be interesting to see."

"Don't forget the battle between the two coaches - Luis Enrique and Pep Guardiola," Steven Gerrard reminded. "It will be interesting to see whether the new coach of Barcelona can outwit the former one."

The others laughed at that.

Gary Lineker smiled. "What about the other semi-final fixture between Juventus and Borussia Dortmund?"

"In all honesty," Rio Ferdinand replied, "Juventus have it a bit easy during the semi-finals. They are against Borussia Dortmund, a team that hasn't been in great form and is currently only 7th in the Bundesliga. With the form Juventus is on, I expect them to win. Unless something goes terribly wrong, I expect them to put this semi-final to bed and qualify for the finals."

"Borussia Dortmund is not so weak as a team," Michael Owen reminded. "They have names like Marco Reus, Ciro Immobile, Ilkay Gündogan, Henrikh Mkhitaryan, Mats Hummels, and Shinji Kagawa. They also have Jürgen Klopp, a coach with a knack for performing on big occasions. I have a feeling that the game won't be that easy."

"They are a good team," Rio Ferdinand agreed. "But against the flying Juventus, they still fall short. Unless there is a miracle, I can't see them outperforming Juventus, a team with players like Zachary, Andrea Pirlo, Carlos Tevez, and many others."

"Well, gentlemen," Gary Lineker, the presenter, interrupted. "The match is on May 5, roughly two weeks away. But between now and then, Juventus will have to play three Serie A games. First, they will play Torino away from home and then face Fiorentina at home before battling Sampdoria in another away fixture. All matches are within a short window of seven days."

"The Serie A fixtures no longer matter for Juventus since they are already champions," Michael Owen said. "I'm sure Coach Allegri will rest most of his key players, including Zachary Bemba, Andrea Pirlo, Carlos Tevez, and even the defenders, like Giorgio Chiellini and Leonardo Bonucci. He could use his second squad so as to allow his first team to focus on only preparing for the Champions League semis."

Gary Lineker nodded, and the show went on. The pundits continued discussing football issues until the TV program ended forty minutes later.

Chapter 577 Preparations for the Upcoming Busy Schedule

With a spot in the UEFA Champions League semis secured, the Juventus players took Thursday off to rest and recover from the post-match fatigue. Then, when Friday morning arrived, they all picked up their boots and headed to the Vinovo to commence preparations for their next games.

They were about to begin a busy schedule of four fixtures. They would first play Torino away from home on Sunday, April 26th. Then, they would face off against Fiorentina at home on Wednesday, April 29th. Lastly, they would battle Sampdoria on Saturday, May 2nd, before hosting Borussia Dortmund the following Tuesday, May 5th, for the first leg of the UEFA Champions League semi-finals.

Bearing all that in mind, a spirited Coach Allegri, who couldn't hide his smile after beating Real Madrid, summoned the players into the tactics room before the training commenced on Friday morning. He called them for a crucial strategy meeting to talk about how they could handle the next three fixtures of the Serie A while also prepping for the Champions League semi-final against Borussia Dortmund.

"Good morning, guys," he said with a smile after the players had taken their seats around the tactics room. "I expect you all had a wonderful time relaxing yesterday. And I do hope that you didn't spend too

much time getting intimate with your other halves or going out to party with an excuse of celebrating our win against Real Madrid last night. Right?"

The players laughed at that, with some whistling and throwing in a few jokes.

Coach Max Allegri grinned. "I had a relaxing day, myself. Thank you all for not asking. Now, back to business. You all know that we have a busy ten-day fixed schedule ahead of us. We'll play Serie A matches (both away and at home) against Torino, Fiorentina, and Sampdoria in a seven-day window. Then, after that, we'll welcome Borussia Dortmund to Turin for the first leg of our UEFA Champions League semi-final battle."

"These are four matches in ten days, with short windows of two or three days between them. Our first team can't handle them all, as that would increase our cumulative fatigue and eventually lower our performance levels. We might even risk putting up a terrible performance in the UEFA Champions League semis if we only use our first-team players for all the fixtures."

The coach glanced around and continued, "Here is what we'll do to overcome this tricky situation. We'll separate the team into two units. The first unit will include eleven of our best players at the moment. They will not participate in the tiring drills to prepare for our next three Serie A matches."

"Instead, they will train at another ground solely to prepare for the first leg of our UEFA Champions League semi-finals against Borussia Dortmund. Of course, they'll still have to participate in our tactical meetings for the Serie A matches since I plan to use them as substitutes in all the games."

"Moving on. The second unit will include the rest of you who won't make the first eleven. You'll undergo the training drills to refine our tactics for our Serie A matches. You'll then get opportunities to serve during our matches against Torino, Fiorentina, and Sampdoria. At that point, you must do your best to perform so we can continue winning and maintaining our unbeaten run."

The coach swept his scorching gaze across some players before saying solemnly, "I know some of you might be thinking that we're already this season's Serie A champions, and it wouldn't matter even if we lost the next three games. You better discard such notions out of your heads. You better correct your attitudes, as we need to continue winning. I especially don't want us to suffer any losses. I want us to continue our unbeaten run for as long as possible."

"Moreover, if some of you from the second unit perform well, I can decide to promote you to the first unit. Then, you will play our upcoming Champions League fixtures. So, don't lose hope even if you're not mentioned in the first unit today. Just continue doing your best on and off the pitch, and I will surely give you an opportunity. Understood?"

"Yes, coach," the players replied.

"Good," Coach Max Allegri said with a nod. "Now, let me read the eleven players in the first unit. We have Buffon, Patrice Evra, Leonardo Bonucci, Giorgio Chiellini, Stephan Lichtsteiner, Arturo Vidal, Andrea Pirlo, Claudio Marchisio, Zachary Bemba, Álvaro Morata, and Carlos Tevez. You eleven will train on the second pitch solely to prepare for our Champions League semis, and I'll supervise most of your training myself. Do your best, as you risk facing relegation to the second unit if you perform below par during our training sessions."

"As for those I haven't named in the first eleven, they will all stay on the first pitch and train with Coach Trombetta. But don't relax. Even while focusing on the other unit, I will still make time to monitor you to ensure you don't embarrass us when you play our next three Serie A games. Understood?"

"Yes, coach," the players not mentioned in the eleven of the first unit replied with vigor. They were right to do so as they would get more match time, with the best eleven out of the way.

Coach Allegri glanced at them and nodded. He then made a few concluding remarks before sending the two groups of players to their respective training grounds.

Zachary was not too happy with the coach's arrangement. In fact, he wasn't alone with regard to the matter. The other Juventus players also had downcast looks as they headed to the second training ground to commence their preparations for the second leg of the UEFA Champions League semis.

"I feel like committing a few mistakes during the upcoming drills," Arturo Vidal was the first to break the silence on the subject. "Maybe the coach will relegate me to the second unit, and I'll be able to play our next three games."

A few others laughed at that but silently agreed with Vidal.

All footballers who could rise to the top had a few traits in common. They were hungry to perform, and they relished competition. They would always do their best to get into the starting eleven for every game that came their team's way, with some even risking to hide injuries to achieve the goal. Such was the nature of professional athletes.

So, you could imagine their feelings when they heard the coach's announcement of the training plan. Some of them were even regretting why they had been too impressive over the past few weeks. They were not too happy with joining the first unit, which would be sitting out their following three Serie A fixtures.

"You guys shouldn't feel down," Buffon, the captain, suddenly said as their group of eleven approached the second training ground. "The coach is doing this for the good of the team. Since we're already champions, he doesn't want to waste most of our energy on the remaining Serie A games."

"Moreover, there's something else I'm sure about. The coach will not dare to rest all of us for all three games. He will rotate and give each of us some match time during the ten days so we can maintain our sharpness and individual playing rhythms while heading into the fixture against Borussia Dortmund."

"I think what the captain says is true," Zachary, who had remained silent, said. "The coach will use us as substitutes or allow us to start one or two of the three games."

As a footballer, he understood he could lose some of his sharpness if he went ten days without playing top-level football. The experienced Allegri was even more aware of this. As such, the coach would have to give his starting eleven some playing time during the ten days before the game against Borussia Dortmund.

As the players whined among themselves, they finally reached the second training ground. Coach Allegri arrived soon afterward, and the training commenced immediately.

They started the session by going through the warm-up exercises. Then, after achieving a good workout rhythm, they went into the agility and stamina drills before eventually delving into the routines targeted toward the actual tactics of the Champions League semi-final.

They practiced various transitions of play that they could execute sent them back to the resting room.

Zachary followed after the rest of his teammates to the locker against Borussia Dortmund for about two hours before the coach sent them back to the resting room.

Zachary followed after the rest of his teammates to the locker room. He then headed to the bathroom and showered before going to the canteen. He grabbed some snacks of bread, bananas, and milk from the counter and then settled down on one of the tables to enjoy the food.

It was at that point that his phone started vibrating. He fished it out of his pocket and glanced at the screen.

A few doubts flashed within his mind when he noticed the call was from Kristin Stein, his publicity secretary. He was confused as she had long cultivated the habit of never calling when he was training with the team. Nevertheless, he pressed the accept button and held the phone against his ear.

Chapter 578 The Not-So-Important Derby Della Mole

"Hey, Kristin!" Zachary spoke into the phone. "What's up?"

"Hey, Zachary!" Her voice sounded from the other end of the line. "I'm calling to inform you that I'm about to travel out of Turin. I'll be away for about a week, so don't be surprised when you try my phone and find it unavailable."

"Oh!" Zachary said while noting that her voice sounded a bit off. He asked, "Is anything the matter? Are you facing any challenges?"

A few more seconds passed, and she answered, "Honestly, this has to do with my grandpa. His health has gotten worse. He is undergoing treatment at the Haukeland University Hospital in Bergen. I'm heading there to see him."

"Your grandpa is not well!" Zachary's eyes narrowed.

Kristin's grandpa was Mr. Martin Stein, the same old scout who brought him from Lubumbashi before sending him to the football academy associated with Rosenborg Football Club in Trondheim, Norway. He had even proposed that they start a sports agency and talent development center together in DR Congo a few years back. But he didn't immediately agree to the proposal since he was still trying to establish himself as a professional footballer.

"How is he coping up?" He asked Kristin.

"Honestly, he's not doing well," she replied. "The doctors say that he has a problem with his liver. They will be carrying out more tests before making sure."

"That's too unfortunate," he said. "I really wish him a quick recovery. Do you need any help?"

"Not right now," she said. "Maybe it would..." She stopped mid-sentence.

"Maybe it would?" Zachary probed.

There were a few more seconds of silence before she spoke. "I know this is selfish of me, considering your fixed schedule. But could you spare some time to visit the old guy? He had always looked forward to meeting and talking to you again."

Zachary considered his schedule over the next few days and said, "I would surely like to visit him. But I'll have to first request permission from the club and my coaches. If they agree, I'll link up with you in Bergen, and we can visit him together."

"That's great," she said, her voice more relaxed. "Just tap on me on WhatsApp when you confirm with your coaches."

"Okay," Zachary agreed. They then started discussing work-related matters, like his publicity events with Nike and Audi. They talked for about ten minutes before she hung up with the excuse of having to catch a flight.

Zachary pushed the phone back into his pocket before considering how he could fulfill Kristin's request.

Coach Max Allegri planned to rest him over the period of the following three Serie A games. But that didn't mean the coach would agree to his travel request to Norway. On the contrary, the coach could refuse while thinking of not exhausting one of his players crucial to his team's performance in the UEFA Champions League semi-finals.

"Well," Zachary thought with a sigh. "I'll just put in the request. If they agree, well and good. If they don't, I'll be honest with Kristin about it."

With the resolution, his mood cleared. He pushed the matter to the back of his mind and started enjoying his food. He ate with all the haste he could muster, as he had to rest for only an hour before attending more tactical training sessions in the afternoon.

The hours on Friday and Saturday went by quickly as the two units of the Juventus team underwent their respective training regimens under the supervision of their coaches.

Sunday, April 26th, the day of Juventus' first match in the busy ten-day schedule, arrived, and players attended their final pre-match tactical meeting. After the coach finished going through the game plan again, they took their team bus to the nearby Stadio Olimpico Grande Torino to battle their close rivals, Torino FC, in yet another Derby Della Mole of Turin.

For Torino FC, this was a high-stakes game to determine whether they would qualify for the following season's Europa League. They were also playing for pride, with the yearning to embarrass Juventus in the derby. As such, they fielded all their best players, hoping to put up one of their best displays for the season.

For Juventus, a team that had already secured the Serie A title, the game was just an inconsequential fixture and a not-so-important derby match stalling their preparations for the UEFA Champions League semis.

Coach Allegri did what everyone expected. He rested seven of his best players and fielded a team full of second-stringers. He left crucial names like Zachary, Tevez, Andrea Pirlo, and Claudio Marchisio, among others, on the bench, showing that he was not that invested in the famous Turin derby.

The game commenced at 3:00 PM, with Torino setting a blistering tempo from the first minute. The men in maroon colors rushed forward, tearing through Juventus' ranks with lightning-fast one-two exchanges before eventually playing a final pass to Fabio Quagliarella, their forward.

Fabio Quagliarella, on his part, remained composed and took a touch that carried him past Angelo Ogbonna, the Juventus center-back for the day. The striker then drove forward and fired a grounded shot towards the inside of the far post from a tight angle.

Fortunately for Juventus, the ball rebounded off the post and headed out of play. And with that, Juventus survived an early goal during the second minute of gameplay.

The game resumed immediately after with a Juventus goal kick. But the spirited Torino players didn't waste a minute before winning possession back.

The home players then settled into a steady rhythm of playing intricate one-twos in the middle while sometimes using abrupt runs through their wing areas to pressure Juventus. They soon became the better team on the field of play and forced the opponents on the defensive. Moreover, when they lost the ball, they would immediately press the opponents to win back possession as soon as possible before recommencing their relentless attacks.

Their brilliant efforts eventually paid off during the 35th minute when a loose pass from Simone Padoin, the Juventus left-back for the day, allowed Matteo Darmian to exploit the space behind Juventus' backline. The other Juventus defenders were clearly caught off guard as the Torino man beat the offside trap before collecting the ball and unleashing a thunderous shot from beyond the edge of the box.

Matteo Darmian's shooting technique was brilliant, and his shot blasted past Marco Storari, Juventus' keeper for the day, before finding the back of the net. With that, the score was 1:0 in favor of Torino, and the Juventus players had to find a way to make a comeback.

On that front, Coach Max Allegri fumed and yelled at his players from the sidelines, making his feelings known to everyone watching. He even instructed some of his first-team players he had left on the bench to start warming up. His warning was clear. If the team didn't start performing, he would probably make some first-half substitutions without a second thought.

Fortunately, Juventus' field players spared him the trouble by soon settling down. They began playing brilliant football and set a relentless tempo as they searched for an equalizer. They constantly beat down on Torino's door and came close to scoring several times.

However, the home team played solid defensive football and thwarted all of Juventus' opportunities. They held on and walked down the tunnel for the halftime break while still leading by a goal to nil.

The second half commenced after the fifteen-minute break, with Juventus continuing to rain down more pressure on Torino's defense. The men in the striped black and white jerseys played ingenious football, with the highlight being when Fernando Llorente got to the end of Roberto Pereyra's well-timed pass during the 72nd minute.

Fernando Llorente remained composed and showed his class as a striker. He drove past the Torino center-backs with a simple weave-and-turn before pulling the trigger. He slotted the ball past the keeper and finally found the back of the net to score Juventus' 1st goal on the afternoon.

The proceedings were back to level terms, and the score was 1:1. Be that as it may, the Juventus players didn't step on the brakes. They continued using penetrating interchanges through the middle to break down the still-tenacious Torino side.

Eventually, their efforts bore fruit during the 83rd minute when Fernando Llorente got to the end of another brilliant diagonal pass from Stefano Sturaro, one of the midfielders. Llorente overpowered one of the Torino center-backs in an aerial battle before heading past the keeper and scoring Juventus' second for the day.

The score was then 2:1 in favor of the visiting Juventus. Coach Max Allegri immediately made appropriate changes and introduced Patrice Evra, a defender, and Arturo Vidal, a defensive midfielder. The two bolstered Juventus' defensive efforts and allowed the visiting team to whittle away the remaining minutes without much fuss.

Eventually, the referee blew the whistle after three minutes of added time. And with that, the game ended with Juventus still leading by two goals to one.

The Juventus players and coaches couldn't contain their happiness as they had won yet another Serie A game and pushed their season tally to 90 points with six matches to go. They even had a huge

opportunity to topple the team's 102-point record set by Antonio Conte's Juventus during the previous Serie A season.

Zachary, who had watched the whole game from the bench, was also excited. He had long forgotten his discontent resulting from not getting some playing time. He really felt good about being a part of a team that was going places and close to breaking records.

Chapter 579 Against Fiorentina

Three days later, on Wednesday, April 29th.

Juventus welcomed Fiorentina at their home ground in Turin for their 33rd fixture of the 2014-15 Serie A season.

Coach Max Allegri was still maintaining his plan of resting his crucial players. He once again fielded a team almost full of second-stringers. But what excited most fans was that he bolstered the 'seemingly weak' starting squad with the addition of Zachary Bemba, Andrea Pirlo, Carlos Tevez, Leonardo Bonucci, and Giorgio Chiellini, who were all first-team players of the highest quality.

When asked why he hadn't rested all his first-team players for that game against Fiorentina during the pre-match press conference, he replied, "I don't want my players to get rusty before our semi-finals against Borussia Dortmund. I must balance resting them with giving them some game time for the next seven days."

The reporter then asked, "There are still six games to go before the end of the season. But aside from already securing the title, you and your boys have already amassed a whopping 90 points. You're in a great position to break the record of accumulating the most points ever in a single Serie A season by surpassing the 102-point mark."

"Are you actively looking forward to breaking this record? Or is it not one of your key objectives, especially with your upcoming hectic schedule that includes the Champions League semi-finals?"

Coach Max Allegri smiled at the reporters and said, "We're Juventus. We always play to win every game. We'll try to do the same for our remaining Serie A fixtures."

The coach's responses excited the Juventus fans, who were more than eager to see their team continue winning. They were all in a hyper mood as they waited for the game to commence that Wednesday night.

The pre-match proceedings ended quickly, and the game kicked off right on time at 8:45 PM.

The Juventus team immediately started on the front foot by dominating possession against Fiorentina. Their first-team creative players, including Zachary, Andrea Pirlo, and Tevez, linked up well with the rest early on. Their exchange of the seemingly slow but intricate passes saw them dictate the tempo and create a few chances before the half-hour mark.

Carlos Tevez and Fernando Llorente, the two Juventus attackers, even came inches close to scoring during the 16th and 29th minutes, respectively. But the brilliant efforts of the Fiorentina keeper saw their efforts denied, and the score remained tied at 0:0 with less than a quarter an hour to go to halftime.

The Juventus players didn't give up even after missing opportunities. They maintained their 4-3-1-2 formation and continued dictating the tempo with their intricate passing while waiting for the perfect opportunity to penetrate Fiorentina's tenacious defense.

Their efforts eventually paid off during the 43rd minute when Zachary suddenly worked his magic in the middle of the park. He skipped past Alberto Aquilani, one of the Fiorentina midfielders, and made one of his signature penetrating runs through the middle.

Zachary continued forward and skipped over another sliding tackle before slaloming his way past two more defensive opponents.

Speed like the wind, he approached the final third and played a well-timed through ball past the strikers to release Carlos Tevez.

Carlos Tevez, on his part, was as sharp as ever. He accelerated to top speed and beat Fiorentina's offside trap before connecting with the pass from Zachary. The Argentine then drove the ball into the box like a predator on the hunt before sliding it past the keeper with a left-footed drive. He effortlessly found the far bottom corner and scored Juventus' first goal on the night during the 44th minute, right before halftime.

The first half ended immediately after the ensuing celebrations, and the players walked down the tunnel for halftime.

Coach Max Allegri acted with urgency to give his halftime pep talk. He didn't say anything concerning changing the tactics against Fiorentina. Instead, he encouraged the players to remain hardworking and disciplined during the second half. He also urged them to play boldly and get one or two more goals before sending them back to the field for the second half.

FWEEEEEEE

The referee blew the whistle, and the second half began, with Fiorentina playing much better football.

The men in purple arrayed themselves into a 3-5-2 flat formation, which worked wonders and soon allowed them to overpower Juventus in the middle areas. They then set a stable tempo and began relying on long balls over the midfield to apply a fair amount of pressure on Juventus' backline.

The tides of the game seemed to have changed, and it wasn't long before Fiorentina started creating chances against Juventus. Mario Gómez and Mohamed Salah even came close to capitalizing on two floating passes, the first time during the 51st minute and the second time during the 56th minute. However, on both occasions, Juventus' ever-tenacious defensive duo of Leonardo Bonucci and Giorgio Chiellini stood firm and thwarted their goal attempts.

But the misses didn't discourage the Fiorentina players, who continued attacking with increasing intensity. They committed more men forward, with even their defensive midfielders pushing into Juventus' half. Marcos Alonso and Joaquín Sánchez, the two wing-backs, had also started playing as true-blue attacking wingers to bolster Fiorentina's hunt for the equalizer.

But what the Fiorentina players seemed to forget was that Juventus was a monster of an entity on the counterattack. They were soon punished for that oversight when Andrea Pirlo collected a loose ball at the edge of the box after a failed Fiorentina corner kick during the 59th minute.

Andrea Pirlo didn't waste time finding Zachary, who had just arrived in an unmarked pocket of space on the left wing. And with that, the counter was on, and the attackers in the striped black and white jerseys bounded forward like a pride of lions on the hunt.

Zachary exchanged snappy one-twos with Carlos Tevez and Roberto Pereyra as they tore down Fiorentina's unprepared defense. They moved from one end of the pitch to another within less than ten seconds, and the ball eventually returned to Zachary as he stepped into the final third on the left flank.

Zachary collected it mid-stride and cut into the pitch without slowing down. He then skipped past a tackle from the 'very last' Fiorentina player, who had remained back to defend, and opened up the space toward the goal. Everything else was simple, and he immediately squared a pass to find the arriving Fernando Llorente in the middle.

Fernando Llorente was in the right place at the right time as the ball arrived towards him. He remained composed and took a touch to control it before hammering it goalward and past the keeper. He found the back of the net and scored Juventus' second goal on the night during the 60th minute.

The score was then 2:0 in favor of Juventus, and Coach Max Allegri returned to his recent antics of ever wanting to rest his crucial players. The Juventus manager substituted Zachary Bemba, Carlos Tevez, and Andrea Pirlo out of the game. And with the absence of the three, the situation on the pitch became trickier.

The Fiorentina players became bolder and bolder and attacked with more zeal. Diagonal passes into the box became the order of the night as Mario Gómez and Mohamed Salah, the two attackers, continued making spirited runs behind the Juventus backline. They were really going out to score a goal and find some lifeline for a comeback.

However, their efforts bore no fruit, mainly due to Juventus' tenacious defensive efforts. The players of the Turin-based team relied on their same old tricks to see out the remaining minutes of the game. They fell back and remained solid in defense while maintaining a fair measure of a threatening counterattacking presence.

And with that, the game fell into a steady rhythm, with Fiorentina continuously on the attack while Juventus mostly defended. Unsurprisingly, no more eventful occurrences transpired until the referee blew the final whistle after three minutes of added time.

Following the usual practice, the coach gave the Juventus players a day off after their game against Fiorentina. The intent was for them to recover before returning to the training ground.

Zachary, who had provided two assists in the game the previous night, woke up early at around five, feeling more refreshed than fatigued. He quickly went through his morning routines before packing a light luggage and setting off for the airport with his bodyguard - Lorenzo.

He had finally received a response concerning his travel request to Norway the previous evening, right before the game against Fiorentina. The club management had permitted him to go on the journey on his off day, which happened to be Thursday. But there was also a condition. He had to return to Turin the same day and be ready to attend Juventus' training on Friday.

Zachary had no problem with the conditions set by the club. He planned to take a six-in-the-morning private chartered jet to Bergen and visit Mr. Martine Stein, Kristin's grandpa and the scout who brought him to Norway. He would spend about one hour or two with the old gentleman before relying on the same private jet to return to Turin by evening.

Chapter 580 Seeing Mr. Stein Again

A sparkling white private jet touched down on the runway of a small airstrip in Bergen at 10:45 AM. It soon came to a complete halt and quickly extended its airstair.

Zachary and Lorenzo, who were the only passengers on board, immediately moved to exit from the small aircraft. They carried their bags and slowly walked down the stairs. They soon stepped onto the tarmac and started heading towards the Audi SUV parked a few dozen meters away from the runway.

As they walked, Zachary squinted his eyes against the almost-blinding sunrays while constantly breathing in to take in the refreshing spring air of Bergen. A soft smile outlined his face, and he sighed again and again at the comfort and speed of the private jet.

They had only set off from Turin at 7:00 AM. But due to the efficiency of the private jet, they had covered the trip that could have taken them five-plus hours in only three hours and forty-five minutes. They had arrived in Bergen much earlier than expected, and they now had all the time to visit Mr. Martin Stein before returning to Turin in the evening.

Such was the efficiency of using a private chartered jet. It allowed you to travel comfortably and quickly without experiencing the commotion of stopovers. You could even dodge the fuss associated with busy airports at your destinations by choosing to land at a private airstrip like they had just done.

After experiencing how wonderful the private jet could be, Zachary even considered acquiring one for himself for a minute. But after recalling its purchase price that could go anywhere in the range of 2 million Euros and above, plus the associated costs of jet fuel, he sighed and shook his head.

Yes, he would get himself one in the future. But that would be after his retirement when he had saved plenty of money or gained ample returns from his investments. That was his immediate plan.

"Boss!" Lorenzo, the bodyguard, called out, thus interrupting Zachary's reverie. "I booked the car for us to use during our short stay here in Bergen. The driver already knows what to do. He'll take us straight to the Haukeland University Hospital."

"Great," Zachary said and stepped into the back seat of the waiting SUV. Lorenzo didn't follow him in the back. Instead, he sat beside the driver before giving the guy a few instructions.

The driver nodded at all the instructions and quickly eased the car out of the private airstrip. He gradually accelerated out of the gates, and soon, they were cruising through the neat streets of Bergen.

As the familiar architecture of Bergen flashed by, Zachary recalled some moments from his last visit to the place. He had enjoyed dinner with Mr. Martin Stein, who had been quite spirited. The old scout had even proposed they work together to start a sports agency and talent development center in Africa. But, with his career in mind, he hadn't replied positively to the suggestion.

"I wonder if he still wishes to start the agency!"

Thoughts flashed through Zachary's head as the car moved forward. Eventually, they slowed down and approached the gates of the Haukeland University Hospital, where Kristin was already waiting.

"Zachary, you made it," Kristin said with a smile as Zachary stepped out of the car. "How are you doing?"

"I'm doing fine," Zachary replied with a smile and hugged Kristin. "How are you? And how is your grandpa doing now?"

"Well, I'm not in the best of moods," she replied while returning the hug. "My grandpa's condition has improved. But he is still weak. The doctors say the cause might be the Hepatitis infection he suffered some years back. It could have damaged his liver."

"I'm really sorry to hear that," Zachary said. He released Kristin from the hug and continued, "I really hope he gets well soon."

Kristin nodded and sighed at that. "I'll take you to see him now. I left when he was still awake and waiting for you. Follow me."

Zachary nodded and followed after Kristin. They walked through the clean hallways of the hospital and passed by many medics in their uniforms, plus some patients, before eventually arriving at a door within the private ward.

Kristin knocked a few times before pushing the door open.

Immediately, the scene inside the room, with the haggard-looking Mr. Stein lying on the hospital bed, presented itself before Zachary's eyes. He winced despite himself as the moment reminded him of the last days of his grandma.

"Kristin! You're back?"

An unfamiliar voice sounded from within the room. Zachary turned to the source and realized that the person who had spoken was a blonde middle-aged woman seated on the other side of the hospital bed. She had a graceful air about her persona, and her oval face still showed clear signs of the stunning beauty she had been during her younger years. She also resembled Kristin to a certain extent and was probably her mother.

"Mom!" Kristin replied as they walked into the room, thus confirming Zachary's suspicions. "I have brought Zachary. He's a professional footballer Grandpa wanted to meet."

"Oh, so this is Zachary," Kristin's mother said. She stood up and extended her hand to him. "I have seen you a couple of times on TV. I have also heard a lot about you from Kristin and Mr. Stein. But this is the first time we're meeting."

"Yes, that's right," Zachary replied. "It's nice to meet you, ma'am." He took her hand in greeting.

Kristin's mom smiled. "Thanks for taking great care of Kristin. Since childhood, her dream has always been to follow in her grandpa's footsteps by working in the football industry. As her mom, I'm very thankful to you for offering her such a great opportunity."

"No need for thanks," Zachary said with a dismissive wave of his hand. Suddenly, something triggered his senses, and he turned his gaze towards Mr. Stein. The sickly old gentleman seemed to have been sleeping moments ago. But the voices had most likely interrupted his rest. He was now awake and glancing at Zachary with a weak smile.

"Zachary! You're here?" He said in a barely audible voice. "I'm glad you made it. Otherwise, if you had delayed, I might have gone to heaven without seeing you."

"Hello, Mr. Stein," Zachary greeted and sat on a chair beside the hospital bed. "You must not speak like that. A positive mindset is crucial for your recovery."

Mr. Stein smiled and sighed. "It feels like just yesterday when I traveled to Lubumbashi and saw a boy with potential partaking in one of the trials. I brought him to Europe, thinking he might mature into another solid footballer who could help my former team, Rosenborg, achieve its past glory."

"But within a short five years, he has already exceeded all expectations and even joined one of the greatest teams in Europe. He even has a chance of making this year's Ballon d'Or shortlist. What a legend you've created in this short window, Zachary! I feel like discovering you can be considered the greatest and most important achievement in my scouting career."

Zachary smiled and chose not to reply.

It was at that moment that Kristin's mom interrupted. "We two need to get some fresh air," she said. "You guys can take your time talking." She tactfully pulled Kristin out of the room and closed the door behind her.

Mr. Stein smiled and turned in bed. "Do you remember my proposal from years back? I suggested we collaborate to start a sports agency and talent development center."

Zachary nodded. "I do remember the proposal. In fact, I was constantly thinking about it while on my way here. But don't burden yourself with such issues at the moment. You only need to focus on your recovery, and we can talk about the proposal after you heal."

Mr. Stein sighed again and said quietly, "I know my body well. I don't think I have much time."

Zachary's eyes flashed and narrowed. He looked at the sickly old scout but decided not to give needless words of advice or consolation.

"You must be thinking that I have chosen to give up the battle early," Mr. Stein continued. "But let's forget all that and focus on what's important. Have you ever had a dream you wanted to accomplish so badly? I'm talking about something you yearn and dream to do before your life's journey ends."

Zachary nodded. Becoming a professional footballer and playing for one of the best teams in the world had always been his dream in his two lives. But he had already realized it when he joined Juventus the year prior.

Mr. Stein smiled. "Then, you can understand me. I've always yearned to put up talent development centers in Africa. These centers will then help develop most of the neglected footballing talents there and help them have a chance of overturning their fate. At least, I want to set the foundation for this goal before I leave this world."

Zachary took a deep breath and sighed. He considered how the old scout had saved him a lot of trouble by bringing him to Europe and asked, "How can I be of help, then?"

"I hope to use your name to market this venture," Mr. Stein said.

"Oh," Zachary said with some surprise. "Don't you want me to invest any money?"

Mr. Stein shook his head. "If I asked you for capital and still used your name to market the venture, I would be unfairly exploiting you. You must understand that the popularity associated with your status can already match millions of dollars. We only need to use this popularity to elevate the venture. And for that, we're willing to surrender 30% of shares in the company responsible for managing the entire project."

"Oh!" Zachary exclaimed. "This seems like a good deal. I don't see any reason to reject your proposal. I will notify Emily Anderson, my agent and lawyer, to meet your people soon. She'll be in charge of discussing all the progressive matters related to the venture."

"Great," Mr. Stein said and let out a breath. "I'm glad that you agreed to this. Thanks a lot."

"No problem." Zachary smiled and changed the subject. They started discussing various topics, big and small, including current football news, club politics of the most prominent teams in Europe, and even the future of the transfer market. They talked for about an hour until Zachary said his goodbyes and left the hospital.

He had fulfilled his promise to Kristin and visited Mr. Stein in the hospital. They had even agreed to collaborate to start a massive project in Africa. His next order of business was to return to Turin and continue preparing for the upcoming matches, including the Champions League semis.