

Greatest 641

Chapter 641 A Stalemate

641 A Stalemate

As Zachary's thunderous volley found the back of the net, the bar in Abidjan erupted into jubilant celebrations. Kwame Bamba, Adeoluwa Soro, and Yannick Goué caught up in the euphoria, joined the chorus of cheers and hugs that swept through the crowd. Strangers became instant friends as they high-fived and chanted in unison, their voices echoing with Ivorian pride.

Across from them, a particularly passionate fan had shed his shirt, his fists pumping in the air as he bellowed the names of Ivory Coast and Zachary. The excitement levels were sky-high, the energy waves profound as the fans reveled in their team's early lead against Russia.

As the cheers began to subside, the familiar voice of the commentator on the screen caught their attention again. The commentator's excitement was evident as he lauded Ivory Coast's stunning goal and Zachary's exceptional skill in executing the volley that had left the Russian goalkeeper helpless.

"Did you see that goal?" Kwame exclaimed, turning to his friends with a wide grin. "Zachary's on fire tonight!"

Yannick nodded enthusiastically. "That was insane! What a strike! We're off to a great start."

Caught up in the excitement, Adeoluwa added, "I told you Zachary was the one to watch. He's a game-changer!"

Their conversation was filled with adrenaline and excitement, their voices blending with the cheers and chants reverberating through the bar. But as the match progressed, their attention was again drawn to the intense action unfolding on the screen.

With the Russian fans rallying behind their team, Russia launched a wave of attacks in response to conceding the opening goal. They controlled the game for a few tense minutes, probing the Ivorian defense for an opportunity to equalize.

The Russian midfielders were particularly bold and daring as they settled into a profound rhythm and started unleashing long-range passes into the heart of the Ivorian defense. Their intentions were clear; since they couldn't break through Ivory Coast's midfield and defensive shape with grounded passes, they would now try searching for opportunities using long balls to their strikers.

To the surprise of many, their efforts soon paid off, and they found their chance during the 16th minute. It was Aleksandr Samedov, the midfielder, in the thick of the action. He unleashed a long-range ball from deep within Russia's midfield and sent it towards Ivory Coast's side of the pitch.

On the other side, Artem Dzyuba, the ever-hardworking center forward, also went into action as the ball descended toward him. He outmuscled Lamine Koné, the Ivorian center-back, in a battle of pure strength close to the edge of the box before chesting the ball down. Then, just as swiftly, he whirled around the defender and unleashed a thunderous shot toward the goal, aiming to level the score.

His technique was flawless, and the ball took off with incredible speed, heading for the inside of the right post with a wicked curl. But Sylvain Gbohouo, Ivory Coast's goalkeeper, showcased remarkable athleticism and reflexes, diving to punch the ball out of play and deny Russia a goal during the 16th minute.

The referee blew the whistle and pointed to the corner spot, and the bar erupted into renewed cheers and applause as Gbohouo's save kept Ivory Coast in the lead. The fans, still buzzing from Zachary's goal, were now appreciating the heroics of their goalkeeper as well.

"That was close!" Adeoluwa exclaimed, his eyes glued to the screen. "Gbohouo saved us there!"

Kwame nodded in agreement. "We need to stay focused. Russia won't go down without a fight."

With a grin, Yannick added, "But with Zachary and Gbohouo in top form, I'm confident we can see this through!"

The energy in the bar was volatile! Fans were on the edge of their seats, eagerly awaiting the moment the Russians would take their corner kick. There was also a palpable sense of tension in the air, adding to the excitement of the game.

Meanwhile, the Luzhniki Stadium in Moscow was now a cauldron of emotion as Russia prepared to take the corner kick in the 17th minute of their round-of-sixteen clash against Ivory Coast. The home fans, their passion palpable, had created an explosive atmosphere that reverberated through the skies and sent tremors through the stadium.

The noise was deafening, a relentless roar that seemed to fuel the Russian players as they crowded into the box, their eyes fixed on the goal ahead. The Ivorian defenders, momentarily affected by the overwhelming support for the hosts, felt the pressure mounting as they braced themselves for the impending corner kick. Fortunately, in that moment of chaos and cacophony, Ivory Coast's leaders stepped up. The goalkeeper, Sylvain Gbohouo, the experienced forward and captain, Gervinho, and the midfield maestro, Zachary, took it upon themselves to rally their teammates. Amidst the ear-splitting noise, their voices rang out, urging their fellow players to block out the distractions and stay focused on the task before them.

"Stay sharp! Ignore the noise! Eyes on the ball!" Gbohouo shouted, his voice cutting through the tumultuous crowd.

Eyes blazing with determination, Gervinho added, "This is our moment! We can't let them score!"

Remaining composed amidst the chaos, Zachary directed his teammates calmly. "Mark your men! Stick to your positions!"

Their words of encouragement and guidance injected a sense of calm amidst the storm. Encouraged by their leaders' resolve, the Ivorian players squared their shoulders and prepared to defend the corner kick with renewed determination.

Seconds ticked by just like that, and as the referee signaled for the corner to be taken, the noise reached even greater heights. Yuri Zhirkov, stationed at the corner spot for Russia, wasted no time before taking charge of the corner kick. The crowd held their breath as the ball was sent on a curling trajectory into the packed box, with players from both sides hustling to get a piece of the action.

There was pushing, shoving, and grappling as the players tried to gain an advantage, creating a chaotic scene. The ball ricocheted wildly around the box, causing even more confusion and raising the tension in

the stadium. Suddenly, out of the chaos, the ball landed at the feet of Russia's towering striker, Artem Dzyuba. With lightning-fast reflexes, Dzyuba seized the opportunity and unleashed a sudden strike that flew past the Ivorian defender Franck Kessié and into the back of the net.

The stadium erupted in a deafening roar as Russia equalized just five minutes after conceding a goal. The scoreline now read 1-1 in the 18th minute, and the fans applauded wildly as the Russian players embraced and celebrated their swift response to Ivory Coast's opening goal.

The game eventually continued after the celebrations amid high expectations. But, the Ivorian players seemed heartbroken after conceding the equalizer, which was an unfortunate twist after the initial joy of scoring the opening goal only minutes ago. Their devastation showed on their faces, and their performance was below what it had been during the opening minutes.

The Russians took advantage of the drop in the Ivorians' energy levels, and as the game progressed, their confidence grew, buoyed by the thunderous cheers of their home crowd. They relentlessly attacked the Ivorian defense, employing long balls and crosses to unsettle them.

Despite the pressure, the Ivorian goalkeeper, Sylvain Gbohouo, and his stalwart defenders held their ground, exhibiting an unwavering resolve. They tirelessly defended their goal, thwarting the Russian advances several times to keep the scoreline level at 1-1 until the teams went down the tunnel for the halftime break.

As the Ivorian players returned to the dressing room, the atmosphere grew tense, and a heavy mood filled the room. The players caught their breath and regrouped, knowing that the second half would be just as grueling as the first. The Ivorian coach, Hervé Renard, strode into the room with a solemn expression etched on his face, his eyes blazing with determination. He meant business. He wasn't about to let his team play like amateurs any longer.

"Gentlemen, listen up," Renard began, his voice ringing with unconcealed urgency. "We're better than this, and we must go out there and show it in the second half. We must play with precision, intensity, and heart. We need to prove to the world that we belong here."

Renard paced the room, his words resonating with each player. "We have a game plan and need to stick to it. When we defend, we must do it like our lives depend on it. We must do our best to avoid conceding another careless goal. And when we attack, we must do so with purpose and precision. No more hesitation, no more doubts."

Renard's words were a rallying cry, a call to arms for his team to rise above adversity and showcase their true potential. "Remember why you're here. Remember the pride of wearing the Ivory Coast jersey. Let's go out there and play football!"

With a few inspiring final words, Renard motivated his players and infused them with a renewed sense of determination. The halftime break ended, and the Ivorian team emerged from the dressing room with a steely resolve, ready to take on the challenges of the second half head-on.

Chapter 642 To the Quarter-Finals

642 To the Quarter-Finals

A noticeable change swept through the Ivorian players as the second half commenced. Inspired by their coach's impassioned halftime talk, they adopted a calmer, more composed approach to the game. The frantic panic and drop in energy of the first half gave way to a measured and patient style of play, characterized by precise passing and intelligent build-up from the back.

In the heart of the midfield, Zachary's talents shone brightly again. He mesmerized the crowd with every touch of the ball and confounded the Russian midfielders with his world-class dribbling and impeccable passing skills. His ability to dictate the game's tempo became evident as he orchestrated Ivory Coast's attacks, threading passes through tight spaces and creating scoring opportunities for his teammates.

However, as Zachary's influence on the game grew, so did the desperation of the Russian players. Unable to contain his relentless runs and intricate footwork, they resorted to increasingly physical tactics, resulting in a flurry of fouls against the Ivorian playmaker.

The referee's patience wore thin as the fouls piled up, disrupting the game's flow. Over the course of a few minutes, he brandished four yellow cards at the Russian players, who had resorted to fouling Zachary in a bid to stifle his impact. The Russian fans, frustrated by the perceived harshness of the referee, booed vehemently, their displeasure echoing through the stadium.

Despite the rough treatment, Zachary continued to ply his trade, refusing to be deterred by the physicality of the opposition. His resilience and skill kept Ivory Coast in the game as they continued to push forward, probing Russia's defense in search of a breakthrough.

The Russians, while relieved to have curtailed Zachary's influence to some extent, knew that the Ivorian playmaker remained a potent threat. The game had become a battle of wits and wills, with both teams locked in a tense struggle for supremacy on the pitch, but Zachary seemed to remain the key. So, the Russians became even more shameless and double-teamed him, hoping to smother his impact completely.

The game continued, and as the 82nd minute approached, a sense of stagnation had settled over the pitch. Zachary was still tightly marked by Aleksandr Samedov and Roman Zobnin, the tenacious Russian midfielders. Their vigilant eyes and physical presence deterred any attempts to involve Zachary in the play, leaving the game in a lull with few notable attacks.

Sensing the need for a spark, the coaches made a few substitutions, attempting to inject fresh energy into their respective teams. However, the tactical stalemate persisted, exacerbated by Russia's adoption of time-wasting strategies to preserve the scoreline.

The Ivorian fans were on the edge of their seats as the game progressed to the final five minutes without any noteworthy opportunities for their team. But just when the tension in the stadium was almost unbearable, Zachary suddenly moved, unleashing a burst of sheer brilliance that left the spectators stunned during the 87th minute.

It began with a relentless display of pure determination and team spirit. Sensing an opportunity, Zachary escaped his markers and surged toward Daler Kuzyayev, the Russian midfielder, who was about to control the ball on the wing. With lightning speed, Zachary executed a skillful sliding tackle, his boot skimming through the grass like a viper on the hunt as he stole the ball cleanly from Kuzyayev's grasp.

Before the Russians could react, Zachary was back on his feet, racing toward the opposite end of the pitch with a singular focus. His speed was breathtaking, leaving opponents in the dust as he cut inside from the wing.

Yuri Zhirkov, Russia's wing-back, attempted to thwart Zachary's run, but the Ivorian playmaker glided past him effortlessly, using a combination of quick sidesteps and a routine change of pace.

As Zachary approached the box, Fyodor Kudryashov, another Russian defender, moved in to halt his progress. Undeterred, Zachary showcased his agility and ball control, dancing past Kudryashov with a stunning series of mesmerizing moves reminiscent of a skilled breakdancer.

With the tension mounting and the stadium holding its breath, Zachary found himself face-to-face with the goalkeeper, who had rushed out to meet him. In a moment of sublime composure, Zachary skillfully lifted the ball above the keeper's outstretched arms, sending it looping gracefully into the back of the net.

The bar in Abidjan erupted into a frenzy of celebration as Zachary's stunning goal rippled the net during the 88th minute.

Kwame Bamba, Adeoluwa Soro, and Yannick Goué caught up in the euphoria, leaped onto the table, their jubilant dance drawing cheers and applause from the ecstatic crowd. The atmosphere was like a volatile chemical reaction, filled with the infectious joy of victory as people banged tables, clinked beer bottles, and chanted Zachary's name.

Amidst the revelry, the replay of Zachary's goal appeared on the screen, prompting a hushed wonderment to settle over the fans. They watched in awe as Zachary showcased his incredible skills, agility, and precision, leaving everyone watching astonished.

"Did you see that? Zachary is a genius!" Adeoluwa exclaimed, his eyes wide with amazement.

Kwame nodded enthusiastically. "That goal was pure magic. He's the hero tonight!"

Unable to contain his excitement, Yannick added, grinning, "I knew Zachary would come through! This here is our moment!"

Their conversation was brimming with excitement and admiration for Zachary's talent, a testament to the passion for their national team. As they discussed Ivory Coast's prospects for the remaining minutes of the game, their smiles widened, fueled by the hope of victory.

The game resumed, and the tension in the bar was palpable as fans nervously watched the final moments unfold on the screen. Prayers and cheers filled the air as Ivory Coast's players displayed resilience and determination, defending their lead with unwavering spirit.

Finally, after six agonizing minutes of added time, the referee's whistle pierced the air, signaling the end of the match. The bar erupted into triumphant cheers and applause, joyous tears glistening in the eyes of many.

"We did it! We're through to the quarter-finals!" Kwame shouted, his voice filled with joy.

Adeoluwa hugged his friends tightly. "I can't believe it! Zachary led us to victory!"

Yannick, wiping away tears of joy, exclaimed, "This is a historic moment for Ivory Coast! We're going all the way!"

The bar reverberated with celebration, the sound of cheers and laughter mingling with chants of triumph. For the fans gathered there, it was a night they would never forget. It was a night when their team's resilience and Zachary's brilliance united them in a shared sense of pride and accomplishment.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the world...

The Luzhniki Stadium in Moscow echoed with the bittersweet symphony of victory and defeat after the final whistle blew. The Russian fans slumped in their seats, disappointment etched on their faces, while Ivorian supporters erupted in euphoria, their cheers filling the air with an electric buzz.

Zachary, the match-winning hero, was at the center of it all. His teammates lifted him on their shoulders, chanting his name with eagerness. His heart swelled with pride and joy, knowing that his two goals had secured Ivory Coast's historic qualification for the World Cup quarter-finals.

As he basked in the crowd's adulation, Zachary couldn't help but reflect on his journey. From the small fields of Norway, where he first kicked a ball as a professional footballer with dreams in his eyes, to this grand stage where he now stood triumphant, it had been a remarkable odyssey of passion, dedication, and relentless pursuit of excellence.

Maxwell Sterling, the BBC One sports correspondent, approached Zachary for a post-match interview, his camera crew capturing every emotion on the maestro's face.

"Zachary, congratulations on a phenomenal performance," Maxwell's voice boomed through the speakers. "You were absolutely brilliant out there, scoring two goals and taking your tally for the World Cup campaign to five goals. How do you feel?"

Zachary couldn't help but grin from ear to ear, his eyes twinkling with pride. "Thank you so much. It's an honor to contribute to our team's success today."

Maxwell leaned in closer, his eyes curious. "Can you walk us through that amazing run you made from the wing and scored the winning goal in the 88th minute? What was going through your mind at that moment?"

Zachary's eyes sparkled with memories and emotions. "It was like time stopped," he replied, his voice brimming with enthusiasm. "I saw the opening and just went for it. The defenders were closing in, but I took the risk, and everything just fell into place. I pushed myself to the limit, and the adrenaline rush was incredible. When the ball hit the back of the net, it was an indescribable feeling. I knew we were on the way to victory, and it was all worth it!"

Maxwell nodded, impressed by Zachary's composure and skill under pressure. "And what does this victory mean for Ivory Coast, especially reaching the quarter-finals for the first time?"

A wide grin spread across Zachary's face. "It's a moment of pride for our nation... for our continent, Africa," he declared. "We've worked tirelessly to get here, and this is just the beginning. We want to go all the way and make our country and continent proud."

The camera zoomed in on Zachary's determined expression, capturing the fire in his eyes and the unwavering belief in his team's abilities.

Maxwell then shifted the focus to the upcoming challenges. "Looking ahead to the quarter-finals, you will face Croatia or Denmark. What are your thoughts on the team's preparation and chances?"

Zachary's demeanor turned serious, his gaze unwavering. "We know it's going to be tough," he admitted. "But we're ready. We'll train harder, strategize better, and leave everything on the pitch. We believe in ourselves, and that belief will carry us through."

As the interview concluded, Zachary's words resonated throughout the stadium, igniting a sense of hope and determination among fans and viewers alike. He was not just a footballer but also a symbol of resilience, passion, and the relentless pursuit of dreams—a true winner on and off the field.

Chapter 643 Arriving in Sochi

The morning after their thrilling 2-1 victory over Russia, the Ivorian national team gathered for breakfast, their spirits still buoyed by their previous night's triumph. After filling their stomachs and enjoying some well-deserved relaxation, they packed their bags and headed to the airport in Moscow. Their destination? Sochi, where they would face Croatia in the quarter-finals of the 2018 World Cup six days later.

As they stepped onto the plane, the air was filled with an unexpected sense of ease and comfort. The Ivorian players, Eric Bailly, Serey Dié, Maxwell Cornet, and Cheick Doukouré, were in high spirits, exchanging jokes and witty remarks without a care for anything in the world. Their laughter echoed through the cabin, drawing amused smiles from the other passengers and their coach, Hervé Renard.

Even as the plane soared through the skies en route to Sochi, the atmosphere among them remained lighthearted and relaxed. Between the bursts of laughter and football banter, they also discussed everything from relationships to money and life.

Eric Bailly, known for his infectious humor, sparked a conversation about relationships. "Hey, Cheick, have you finally found a girl who can keep up with your dance moves?" he teased, referring to Cheick Doukouré's attempt at a dancing celebration during a previous training session.

Cheick laughed and replied, "Not yet, Eric! But I'm still searching for that 'special someone' who can keep up with me on the dance floor."

Serey Dié, always the voice of reason, interrupted, "Remember, guys, it's not just about finding someone who can dance with you. It's about finding someone who can dance through life with you."

Their conversation then shifted to lighter topics like money and the luxuries they dreamed of enjoying one day. Maxwell Cornet, with a mischievous twinkle in his eye, shared a humorous anecdote. "I once

dreamed of buying a private island and inviting all of you for a party," he joked, earning chuckles from his teammates.

Wilfried Zaha, known for his extravagant fashion sense, couldn't resist adding, "And I'd be there with my designer suits, making sure we're the best-dressed party on the island!"

As the plane continued its journey, the players relished in each other's company, sharing stories, jokes, and dreams for the future. Despite the intense pressure of the World Cup, these moments of levity served as a reminder of the joy and friendship that football could bring, both on and off the pitch.

Renard, seated with the coaching staff, couldn't help but shake his head with a smile at the players' antics. Despite their playful demeanor, he knew they deserved this moment of relaxation. They had poured their hearts into the game against Russia, and a bit of laughter and camaraderie was the perfect way to unwind.

Meanwhile, Zachary sat quietly, his attention focused on his phone. He scrolled through the sports news, taking in the headlines about his heroics on the pitch. One headline caught his eye, describing his left foot as a "special strategic weapon" against Russia, highlighting his instrumental role in securing the victory for Ivory Coast.

However, his brows furrowed when he stumbled upon articles speculating about his upcoming transfer. Transfer rumors were swirling, with journalists like Fabrizio Romano hinting at a potential move to a Premier League club. Zachary sighed and switched off his phone, shaking his head in annoyance. He was fully committed to the World Cup campaign and didn't want distractions, even about his future club.

Beside him, Wilfried Zaha couldn't resist poking fun at the situation. "Hey, Zachary, Crystal Palace could use a player like you!" he joked, a playful glint in his eyes.

Zachary chuckled and shook his head, playing along. "As tempting as that sounds, I'll stick to the World Cup for now."

The flight to Sochi continued smoothly, with the players enjoying the journey and relishing the anticipation of their upcoming quarter-final match. Two hours later, the air hostess announced their imminent arrival in Sochi, signaling the next chapter in Ivory Coast's World Cup journey.

When they finally touched down in Sochi, they were greeted by the warm embrace of the coastal city. Exiting the plane, they were whisked away in a waiting bus, their anticipation growing as they headed to their hotel. After checking in, Coach Hervé Renard surprised them with the news that they would have a day off to explore Sochi.

Excitement bubbled within the team as they quickly organized themselves for a tour around the city. Accompanied by knowledgeable tour guides, they embarked on a journey of discovery, eager to immerse themselves in the beauty and culture of Sochi.

Their first stop was the breathtaking Black Sea coastline, where the azure waters lapped against the golden sands, creating a picturesque scene that left the players in awe. The cool sea breeze rejuvenated them, setting the tone for a day of exploration.

Next, they ventured to the base of the majestic Caucasus Mountains, their peaks towering above them in a display of natural grandeur. The players marveled at the panoramic views, snapping photos and sharing moments of wonder as they soaked in the mountainous landscape.

The tour then took them to Riviera Park, a verdant oasis of lush greenery and vibrant flowers. Strolling along the winding paths, they enjoyed the tranquil ambiance, taking a break from the intensity of football to appreciate the beauty of nature.

At the Sochi Tea Plantations, they learned about the rich history of tea cultivation in the Russian region, sipping on freshly brewed tea and savoring its aromatic flavors. The serene surroundings provided a peaceful respite for the players, allowing them to unwind and relax.

The final leg of their tour led them to the enchanting Dagomys Botanical Garden, where a dazzling array of plant species greeted them at every turn. The vibrant colors and fragrant blooms captivated their senses, creating a unique sensory experience.

As evening approached, they headed to Sochi Olympic Park, a symbol of sporting excellence and achievement. Standing on the green field of the First Olympic Stadium, Zachary couldn't help but visualize the upcoming quarter-final match against Croatia. The prospect of facing formidable opponents like Luka Modrić and Ivan Rakitić stirred his competitive spirit, fueling his determination to give his best on the field.

The serene moment stretched on, and while still lost in his thoughts, Zachary was brought back to reality by Eric Bailly's cheerful voice. "Hey, Zachary, what's on your mind? You look like you're planning our victory already!"

Zachary chuckled, shaking off his reverie. "Just visualizing the game ahead, Eric. But for now, let's enjoy this moment."

The day ended with a delightful dinner at the hotel, where the team bonded over delicious cuisine and shared laughter. As they retired to their rooms for the night, a sense of anticipation and focus settled over them. The day of rest and exploration had rejuvenated their spirits, preparing them for the rigorous training and intense preparation awaiting them as they geared up for the crucial quarter-final clash against Croatia.

Meanwhile, in another part of Sochi...

Emily Anderson, Zachary's agent, was in great spirits as she arrived in Sochi by train with a close-knit group of Zachary's acquaintances. They were eager to explore the scenic coastal city before witnessing Ivory Coast's crucial match against Croatia in six days. Among them were Zachary's dedicated personal assistant, Kristin Stein, Zachary's meticulous fitness trainer, Bjørn Peters, Bjørn's warm-hearted wife who also served as Zachary's talented chef, Inger, Zachary's biological mother, Céleste Kouame, and Zachary's vibrant step-sister, Natasha Kone.

As they disembarked at Sochi and checked into their hotel, Emily decided to share a room with Kristin. The room was cozy, with a view of the bustling streets below and the distant glimpse of the Black Sea. After settling in, they sat on the plush couch, their excitement palpable.

"Do you think Zachary can continue performing well in the World Cup?" Kristin asked eagerly, flipping through her tablet to check the latest news. "Can he lead Ivory Coast to victory against Croatia?"

Emily smiled proudly. "He's been exceptional, as always. I think he'll be just as sharp against Croatia. As long as his teammates and coaches support him, Ivory Coast will most likely win."

Kristin nodded in agreement. "I can't wait to see how he fares against Croatia's Luka Modrić and Ivan Rakitić in midfield. It's going to be an intense battle."

Just then, Emily's phone rang, interrupting their conversation. Her voice was low and almost muted as she spoke to someone on the other end, scheduling a meeting with club representatives interested in signing Zachary. Kristin couldn't help but lean in, curious to hear more.

Once Emily hung up, Kristin couldn't contain her excitement. "So, did you secure a club for Zachary?" she asked eagerly.

Emily chuckled. "Not yet, but I've narrowed the options to four English Premier League clubs. They're offering great terms, but I want Zachary to focus on the World Cup before diving into negotiations."

Kristin's expression turned thoughtful, a hint of worry clouding her features. Emily noticed the change and gave her a reassuring smile. "You seem worried, Kristin. What's on your mind?"

Kristin let out a heavy sigh and hesitated before speaking. "It's Zachary's career. It's progressing so fast. I'm not sure I can keep up."

Emily nodded, understanding the feeling all too well. "I know what you mean. But let me tell you something. If you really want something, you must fight for it with all your heart, or you'll regret it later."

Kristin looked at Emily with a mixture of gratitude and uncertainty. "I don't know if I have what it takes," she said softly.

Emily smiled reassuringly at her. "You have everything you need, Kristin. You only have to believe in yourself and go for it."

The solemn atmosphere quickly passed, and as they got ready for bed, the thrill of being in Sochi and watching Zachary compete in the World Cup filled them with excitement for what lay ahead. Their conversation turned to lighter topics, but the anticipation of the upcoming days lingered in the air.

Chapter 644 To the Fisht Olympic Stadium

The days leading up to the quarter-final match against Croatia were intense and focused for the Ivorian national team. Coach Hervé Renard was in high gear, orchestrating rigorous training sessions and planning the game strategy with his assistants. Every player was pushed to their limits, both physically and mentally, knowing that they were on the cusp of a historic achievement in the World Cup.

On the training ground, the players displayed unwavering dedication. They honed their fitness, fine-tuned their skills, and absorbed every instruction from the coaching staff. There were no complaints, only a shared determination to give their all for Ivory Coast.

Off the field, Coach Renard and his team of assistants immersed themselves in analyzing Croatia's past matches. They dissected every play and scrutinized every move, searching for weaknesses and opportunities to exploit. Their game plan was meticulous, designed to counter Croatia's strengths and capitalize on any openings.

Interestingly, the football camp remained a hub of discipline and focus. Strict protocols were in place, and players were disallowed from venturing beyond their residences and training grounds. Despite the restrictions, the team remained highly motivated, fueled by the prospect of advancing further in the World Cup.

Zachary, the team's linchpin, epitomized hard work and dedication. He absorbed the drills with boundless keenness, always eager to learn and improve. His leadership on and off the field inspired his teammates to match his level of commitment.

As the days passed in a blur of training sessions, tactical discussions, and mental preparation, the anticipation for the quarter-final match reached a fever pitch. Finally, the day arrived. It was Saturday, 7th July, the very day when Ivory Coast would face Croatia in a clash of spirits on the grand stage of the World Cup quarter-finals.

On that morning of the quarter-final clash against Croatia, the Ivory Coast national team indulged in a much-needed rest period. The past few days had been a whirlwind of intense training sessions, tactical discussions, and mental preparation. Finally, with the game looming on the horizon, the players took the opportunity to unwind and relax in the hotel lounge.

Laughter and banter filled the air as the players conversed and joked around, easing the tension that naturally came with such a high-stakes match. They lounged comfortably, some flipping through magazines while others engaged in light-hearted conversations about anything but football.

The time passed unnoticed, and as midday approached, the team gathered for a sumptuous lunch, enjoying several delicious dishes while basking in the laid-back atmosphere. However, the tranquility was soon disrupted as Coach Hervé Renard called Zachary aside.

"Zachary, come with me to the conference room. It's time for the pre-match press conference," Coach Renard announced, his tone tinged with authority and anticipation.

Zachary, though not particularly fond of press conferences, nodded in understanding. In football, the coach's instructions were akin to military orders from a general, and Zachary knew the importance of adhering to them.

As they entered the conference room, Zachary and Coach Renard were greeted by a sea of journalists, cameras flashing, and microphones poised. The atmosphere crackled with anticipation as the reporters prepared to grill the Ivory Coast representatives.

Coach Renard answered most of the questions, his demeanor composed and professional as he discussed the team's preparations and strategy against Croatia. His answers were insightful and offered a glimpse into the meticulous planning behind Ivory Coast's approach to the crucial match against Croatia.

However, amidst the barrage of questions, a journalist from the BBC caught Zachary's attention. She directed her inquiries 'specifically' at him, delving into various aspects of the upcoming game and Zachary's role within the team.

"Zachary, how do you plan to counter Croatia's midfield dominance?" the journalist asked, her gaze focused and professional.

Zachary, poised and articulate, responded, "By working hard as a team and playing smart. Croatia is a formidable opponent, especially in midfield. We've studied their play extensively and have prepared strategies to neutralize their strengths. It will be a collective effort from the team, and I'm confident we'll execute our game plan effectively."

The journalist seemed or pretended to be impressed with his answer and continued, "You've been exceptional during this World Cup campaign, scoring in every game for Ivory Coast. Do you think you can

continue doing the same against Croatia?" Zachary grinned and replied, "Well, if the opportunity presents itself during the game, I'll give it my best shot. But my focus is not just on scoring - it's on teamwork. I'll be happy even if my teammates score the crucial goals and we win against Croatia. It's all about putting the team first."

The questions continued, covering topics ranging from tactics to team dynamics. Zachary answered each query with professionalism and confidence, showcasing his understanding of the game and his role within the team.

As the press conference concluded, Zachary rejoined his teammates, the weight of anticipation and excitement hanging in the air. The stage was set for a thrilling encounter on the field, and the Ivorian team was ready to give their all in pursuit of victory.

More hours passed, and the evening finally descended upon Sochi with a palpable tension in the air. After a light dinner that barely settled the nerves of the Ivorian players, they boarded their bus, their minds singularly focused on the looming showdown against Croatia. The once light-hearted atmosphere that had accompanied their morning hours was now replaced by a quiet intensity, each player lost in their thoughts, mentally preparing for the crucial game ahead.

As the bus navigated through the bustling streets of Sochi, the outside world seemed to blur into insignificance. Players stared out of the bus windows, their expressions varying from devoted contemplation to steely determination. Zachary, known for his calm demeanor, resorted to music to ease his mind. He plugged in his headphones, immersing himself in a playlist that seamlessly blended Afro-beats with the raw energy of rock music. The rhythmic melodies served as a soothing balm amidst the mounting pressure of the approaching World Cup quarter-final.

Minutes stretched into eternity as the bus edged closer to the hallowed grounds of the Fisht Olympic Stadium in Sochi Olympic Park. The tension inside the vehicle mirrored the electric anticipation simmering outside. The streets were alive with fans, their enthusiasm painting the city in a kaleidoscope of Ivory Coast's vibrant orange and Croatia's iconic red and white hues.

The Ivorian supporters lined the roads, waving flags and banners emblazoned with messages of encouragement. Their chants were loud and heated, igniting a fire within the players as the bus meandered through the jubilant crowds. Some players couldn't resist the urge to wave back, their faces breaking into fleeting smiles at the overwhelming support.

Finally, the bus arrived at the gates of Sochi Olympic Park, greeted by a thunderous roar from the gathered fans. The players disembarked, their hearts swelling with pride at the passionate reception. They exchanged nods and gestures of appreciation before disappearing into the labyrinthine corridors leading to the heart of the massive stadium.

Finally, inside the dressing room, a sense of purpose permeated the air. The Ivorian players donned their warm-up gear, each movement a ritualistic preparation for battle. They then headed to the field, and the coaches guided them through a rigorous pre-game warm-up routine with determination and strategic focus.

Across the pitch, the Croatian team engaged in their own warm-up drills, their presence a looming reminder of the formidable challenge ahead. But Zachary and his teammates remained steadfast, their focus unwavering as they warmed up their muscles and prepared themselves for the battle ahead.

The energy in the stadium reached a fever pitch as kickoff drew near. The stands pulsated with the collective heartbeat of fans from both nations, their cheers and chants creating an electrifying atmosphere. The tension among the players was palpable, each step towards the opening whistle laden with anticipation and expectation.

As the teams retreated to their respective dressing rooms for final preparations, the stage was set for a clash between two teams no one would have expected to make it this far in the World Cup on the pristine turf of the Fisht Olympic Stadium. The dressing room buzzed with a charged energy as the Ivorian players quickly donned their match gear. Zachary felt a rush of adrenaline as he pulled on his orange number ten shirt. The weight of the World Cup quarter-finals hung heavy in the air, each player acutely aware of the significance of the upcoming match.

Coach Hervé Renard stood before his team, his eyes reflecting determination and unwavering belief. His voice, usually calm and measured, now carried a vigorous intensity as he delivered his final pep talk. "Gentlemen, this is it. This is our moment to shine, to show the world what we are made of," he began, his words resonating in the room.

He paced back and forth, his words punctuated by the rhythmic thud of his footsteps. "Today, we face Croatia, a formidable opponent, but remember, we are Ivorian warriors. We play as a team... we fight as a team, and we win as a team," he continued, his voice rising with passion.

"Leave everything on that field. Play with heart, play with courage, and play with pride. There are no second chances and no room for regrets at this stage of the World Cup. This is our time to seize glory, to make history," Coach Renard emphasized, his gaze locking with each player in turn.

He then delved into the intricacies of the game plan, reinforcing key strategies and tactics before concluding with some powerful encouraging words. "Stay disciplined, stay focused, and execute the plan flawlessly. Believe in yourselves, believe in each other, and we will emerge victorious," he said, his voice turning into a thunderous roar reverberating off the walls.

Fueled by their coach's passionate words, the Ivorian players responded with a resounding roar. The collective spirit in the room was palpable, a unified determination coursing through their veins.

Meanwhile, in the Croatian dressing room, Coach Zlatko Dalić stood before his players with a calm yet authoritative presence. His eyes scanned the room, taking in the focused expressions of his team. They were on the cusp of a crucial World Cup quarter-final match, and Dalić knew the importance of his words.

"My warriors, today we face a formidable opponent in Ivory Coast. Do not let their underdog status fool you. They possess world-class talent, especially in players like Zachary Bemba," Coach Dalić said, his voice commanding the attention of every player in the room.

He singled out his midfield maestros, Luka Modrić, Ivan Rakitić, and Andrej Kramarić, urging them to be vigilant and closely monitor Zachary's movements throughout the game. "We cannot afford to give Zachary an inch of space. Shut him down, cut off his supply lines, and we will nullify their attacking threat," he emphasized, his words resonating with the midfield trio.

Coach Dalić then outlined the zonal marking strategies and defensive tactics designed to stifle Zachary's influence on the game before summarizing everything into a few sentences. "Stay disciplined, stay organized, and work as a unit. We control the tempo, and we dictate the play," he reiterated, instilling a sense of tactical awareness in his players.

He stressed the importance of sticking to the game plan while allowing for creativity and adaptability on the field before reminding the players of their team's identity. "Remember our strengths, play to our

style, and trust in each other. We have come this far because of our unity and determination. Today is no different."

With a final nod of encouragement, Dalić looked at his watch, signaling that it was time for them to take the field. "Go out there and give it your all. Leave nothing behind, and let's bring home the victory."

Inspired by their coach's words, the Croatian players exited the dressing room with renewed purpose. They knew the challenges that lay ahead. But they were ready to face them head-on, fueled by Dalić's calm yet motivating pep talk and their determination and skills.

Chapter 645 A VAR Moment Full of Anxiety

The atmosphere in Abidjan was palpable, a tense calm before the storm as fans gathered around every available screen, their eyes glued to the unfolding spectacle. The streets were abnormally quiet. It was almost as if the entire city had come to a standstill to witness this monumental clash between Ivory Coast and Croatia. Families huddled together in their living rooms, friends crowded around TVs in bars and restaurants, and even night workplaces seemed to have paused their activities, all in anticipation of the World Cup quarter-final game.

In homes across Abidjan, the TV screens flickered to life, one after another, displaying the familiar sight of the Fisht Olympic Stadium in Sochi. The commentator's voice echoed through the speakers, greeting viewers in French and setting the stage for what promised to be an unforgettable match. And as the Ivory Coast and Croatia squads were announced, a sense of pride and excitement swept through the Ivorian fans.

The starting line-ups were displayed on the screen, showcasing the talent and determination of both teams. Ivory Coast went with their trusted 4-2-3-1 formation, fielding a squad that had brought them success in previous matches. Familiar players like Serge Aurier, Eric Bailly, Zachary Bamba, Wilfried Zaha, Nicolas Pépé, and Captain Gervinho were ready to give their all for their country.

On the other side, Croatia, also adopting a 4-2-3-1 setup, boasted a formidable squad led by the midfield maestros Luka Modrić and Ivan Rakitić. With Mario Mandžukić leading the attack, they were a force to be reckoned with.

As the national anthems echoed through the stadium, emotions ran high in Abidjan. The fans watched with bated breath, their hearts beating in unison with their team's determination.

And then, as the clock struck 7:00 PM Abidjan time, the moment arrived. The referee's whistle pierced the air, signaling the start of the quarter-final showdown between Ivory Coast and Croatia.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the world...

The World Cup quarter-final between Ivory Coast and Croatia was a clash of titans right from the opening whistle. The atmosphere in the Fisht Olympic Stadium in Sochi crackled with anticipation as both teams battled fiercely for midfield dominance in the opening minutes.

The Ivorian players, donning their iconic orange jerseys, looked determined as they pressed forward, eager to impose their style of play on the match. Zachary Bemba, the talented playmaker, was at the heart of Ivory Coast's midfield as always, orchestrating their attacks with quick feet and sharp vision.

On the other side, the Croatians, in their distinctive red and white kits, showed no signs of backing down. Led by the experienced Luka Modrić and Ivan Rakitić in midfield, they were keen on showcasing their technical prowess and tactical edge.

As the game continued, the intensity became even more heated. Both teams engaged in a series of clashes in midfield, fighting for every inch of space and possession. The midfield battle was particularly fierce, with several aerial duels and sliding tackles flying across the green from all directions.

Suddenly, in the 6th minute of the game, Zachary Bemba found himself with the ball at his feet, looking to break through Croatia's defensive lines. With a burst of speed, he surged toward the other half, only to be slowed down by Ivan Rakitić's well-timed shirt pull. The referee blew the whistle, awarding a free-kick to Ivory Coast.

Quick to capitalize on the set-piece opportunity, Ivory Coast took the free-kick quickly, sending a lofted ball toward the Croatian penalty area. Their captain and center-forward, Gervinho, made a darting run, hoping to connect with the ball and create a scoring chance.

However, Croatia's defensive stalwart, Dejan Lovren, had other plans. Anticipating the play, he read the ball's flying trajectory perfectly, intercepting it before it could reach Gervinho. Lovren cleared the danger with a well-timed header, sending the ball back toward the midfield.

In the ensuing midfield battle, Andrej Kramarić rose high to challenge Serey Dié for an aerial duel. The clash of heads was intense, with both players displaying their determination to win the battle for aerial superiority. But in the end, Kramarić got a decisive touch, directing the ball towards his midfield partner, Luka Modrić.

Luka Modrić, known for his exquisite passing and vision on the field, effortlessly controlled the ball with flair. With a quick glance up the field, he spotted an opportunity to exploit the Ivorian defense. Without any hesitation whatsoever, Modrić unleashed a perfectly weighted curling forward pass, using his signature trivela technique.

The ball sailed through the air with a wicked spin, catching the Ivorian defenders off-guard. Ivan Perišić, Croatia's dynamic winger, had already anticipated the pass and was making a spirited run down the left flank towards Ivory Coast's half.

The stadium erupted, voices cheering in excitement as the commentator's voice boomed over the crowd's roar. "Luka Modrić, the Puppet Master, pulls the strings again in the World Cup with a masterful pass! Ivan Perišić is on the move, folks!"

Ivan Perišić, with his pace and skill, received the ball in stride and continued his relentless charge towards Ivory Coast's territory. Serge Aurier, Ivory Coast's right-back, sprinted to intercept him, but Perišić had other plans.

As Perišić stepped into the final third, he feigned to cut inside, only to unleash a devilishly curling cross towards the crowded box. The ball hung in the air with an intense spin, teasing the defenders and goalkeeper alike. In the heart of the chaos, Mario Mandžukić, Croatia's towering center-forward, made his move.

Mandžukić, known for his aerial prowess, leaped with determination, aiming to meet Perišić's cross and convert it into a goal-scoring opportunity. However, Ivory Coast's resilient center-back, Eric Bailly, was up for the challenge.

However, the jubilation was short-lived as the referee suddenly halted play, his finger pointing to his earpiece. The stadium fell silent as the words "Checking Possible Penalty" and "Handball" flashed on the big screen, indicating that VAR (Video Assistant Referee) was reviewing a potential penalty incident.

The contest became even more fierce as Bailly, with his tenacity and defensive acumen, engaged in an aerial battle with Mandžukić. The two giants clashed mid-air, each determined to gain the upper hand. Mandžukić used his physicality to try and muscle past Bailly, but the Ivorian defender matched him step for step.

Amidst the chaos, Mandžukić managed to get a touch on the ball, attempting to direct it towards the goal. However, Bailly's timely intervention saw the ball deflect off his leg and out of play for a corner kick, much to the relief of the Ivorian fans.

Croatia wasted no time and took the resulting corner kick quickly. Luka Modrić, Croatia's maestro in midfield, delivered another intelligent ball into Ivory Coast's packed box, aiming to capitalize on the confusion. The box turned into a battleground as players jostled and fought for supremacy.

Chaos again ensued as the ball deflected off a few bodies within the box. Fortunately, Eric Bailly showed his composure under pressure and rose to the occasion again. He positioned himself well, anticipating the ball's trajectory, and executed a timely clearance to alleviate the danger. The Ivorian fans erupted, cheering excitedly, as they believed their team to have weathered the storm. They hugged and exchanged high-fives, assuming they had escaped an early scare in their heated quarter-final game against Croatia.

However, the jubilation was short-lived as the referee suddenly halted play, his finger pointing to his earpiece. The stadium fell silent as the words "Checking Possible Penalty" and "Handball" flashed on the big screen, indicating that VAR (Video Assistant Referee) was reviewing a potential penalty incident.

The anxiety immediately soared as players from both teams awaited the VAR decision that could alter the course of the quarter-final match. The fans held their breath, their eyes glued to the screen, as the VAR officials scrutinized the replay from multiple angles.

Zachary was also tense as he waited for the VAR's decision. His heart was beating like a drum in his chest, and he could seem to calm down. He was worried about conceding a penalty and a goal early in the game.

As the seconds passed, the suspense grew thicker, wrapping the stadium in an invisible cloak of anticipation. The Croatian supporters were on the edge of their seats, hopeful for a favorable outcome, while the Ivorian fans were filled with anxiety, praying for a reprieve.

Finally, the referee moved, darting towards the pitch-side monitor with a sense of urgency. The stadium seemed to hold its breath as the referee studied the replay, analyzing every angle of Lamine Koné's handball in the box.

The screen displayed a close-up of Koné's arm position as the corner ball descended into the box. Was his arm in a natural position? That was the critical question that would determine the fate of the penalty decision.

The tension escalated as the referee deliberated, his decision carrying immense weight. Finally, the Ivorian fans' groans of frustration filled the air as the referee pointed to the penalty spot, awarding Croatia a golden opportunity to take the lead.

Meanwhile, the Croatian supporters erupted into jubilant cheers, their excitement palpable as Luka Modrić stepped up to take the penalty. The pressure was immense, but Modrić remained composed and focused on the task.

The referee's whistle pierced through the tense silence soon after, signaling the commencement of the penalty kick. Modrić's movements were swift and deliberate as he approached the penalty spot, his eyes locked on the ball.

Modrić then unleashed the shot, sending the ball hurtling towards its target with precision and power. Sylvain Gbohouo, the Ivorian goalkeeper, reacted instinctively, diving with all his might to make the crucial save.

The ball seemed to move in what could only be slow motion, sailing towards the bottom left corner and narrowly evading Gbohouo's outstretched hand. The collective gasp from the Ivorian fans echoed through the stadium as they watched helplessly, their hearts sinking as the ball found the back of the net.

1-0 flashed on the jumbotron, indicating Croatia's lead as their fans roared to celebrate their opening goal during the 9th minute. On the other hand, the Ivorian players and supporters were crestfallen, the weight of the early deficit weighing heavily on their shoulders.

The atmosphere in the stadium shifted dramatically, with Croatia gaining momentum and confidence from their early lead. As for the Ivorians, they were facing an uphill battle to claw their way back into the quarter-final encounter.

Chapter 646 Searching for the Equalizer

As the cheers from the Croatian fans reverberated through the stadium, the Ivorian team felt a collective pang of disappointment. The early goal conceded during the 9th minute had dampened their spirits, casting a temporary shadow over their determination. On the Ivorian bench, the atmosphere mirrored the subdued mood on the field, with players exchanging looks of concern and frustration.

Sensing the need to uplift his players, Coach Hervé Renard sprang into action. With a commanding presence, he rose from his seat and marched towards the touchline, his voice cutting through the stadium's din like a clarion call. His words were brimming with encouragement, strategy, and unwavering belief in his team's abilities.

"The game is far from over! Stay focused! Stick to the plan!" His booming voice carried across the pitch, reaching each Ivorian player with its resolute tone.

The players, shaken from their momentary lapse, absorbed their coach's words like sponges. There was finally a renewed sense of purpose and determination as they prepared to restart the match after Croatia's goal.

As the game resumed, the Ivorian players showcased a newfound vigor. They pressed harder, chased every loose ball, and disrupted Croatia's attempts to control the tempo. The midfield duo of Luka Modrić and Ivan Rakitić found themselves under constant pressure as the Ivorians refused to give them time on the ball.

Coach Renard's instructions echoed in their minds, urging them to push forward relentlessly. The Ivorian midfielders and attackers, including the dynamic quartet of Zachary, Franck Kessié, Wilfried Zaha, Nicolas Pépé, and the seasoned Gervinho, displayed exceptional off-the-ball movement.

Their persistence finally paid off during the 16th minute when the Ivorian players showcased their determination and skill in a whirlwind of action. They crafted a promising opportunity that left the Croatian defense scrambling to respond.

The sequence began with Franck Kessié's audacious sliding tackle near the center circle, a move that caught Andrej Kramarić off guard and sparked a quick transition for Ivory Coast.

Serey Dié quickly seized the loose ball and scanned the field for options, only to find Zachary tightly marked by Luka Modrić and Ivan Rakitić. Understanding the need for a change in strategy, Serey Dié opted for a swift pass to the right wing, seeking out the reliable presence of Serge Aurier.

Aurier, ever composed under pressure, received the ball with poise before immediately redirecting it down the touchline to find Wilfried Zaha. Zaha, a master of agility and pace, wasted no time as he maneuvered past Ivan Strinić, leaving the Croatian left-back trailing in his wake.

As Zaha surged forward, he initiated a fluid exchange with the experienced Gervinho, who had made a decisive run into the wing. The one-two combination between Zaha and Gervinho showcased the synergy and understanding among Ivory Coast's attacking unit as they quickly cut into the pitch, heading toward Croatia's box at breakneck speed.

The ball was eventually returned to Gervinho, and he executed a deft minus pass toward the edge of the box, where Zachary had expertly just evaded his markers. Zachary immediately sensed the opportunity to strike with his SS-graded game intelligence. He met the pass from Gervinho with a lightning-fast swing of his boot, sending the ball hurtling toward the top left corner of the goal.

The fans around the stadium watched with wide eyes, not even blinking a bit, as the ball sailed through the air, its trajectory seemingly destined for the back of the net. However, a gloved hand appeared in its way at the very last moment as Danijel Subašić, Croatia's goalkeeper, leaped into action. Subašić exploded with sheer reflex and agility, deflecting the ball just enough to divert it out of play for a corner kick.

A collective gasp was immediately heard from the crowd, matched by the collective disappointment of the Ivorian players, none more so than Zachary himself. His hands instinctively flew to the back of his head, a gesture of frustration and regret at the missed opportunity to level the score.

The referee blew the whistle, and the Ivorians immediately began preparing to take the crucial corner kick. With Serge Aurier standing over the ball, the Ivorians knew this could be the moment to turn the tide in their favor. Aurier's lofted ball finally sailed into the box, igniting a frenzy of activity as players from both teams fought for position.

Franck Kessié, known for his aerial prowess, leaped into the air alongside Gervinho and Eric Bailly, hoping to get a decisive touch on the ball. However, Dejan Lovren, Croatia's formidable center-back, rose above the chaotic crowd, using his physicality and defensive edge to clear the danger with a powerful header.

As the ball flew out of the box, the always-vigilant Zachary immediately sensed the danger of a counterattack brewing. He took off like a Ferrari on a Formula One race track, his focus laser-sharp as he tracked the movement of Luka Modrić, Croatia's midfield maestro.

Modrić, ever the orchestrator, deftly controlled the ball and looked to initiate a quick transition, eyeing Mario Mandžukić as his target. Zachary's football instincts quivered, and he recognized the imminent threat. He unleashed a burst of speed that propelled him across the field like a comet streaking through the night sky.

Zachary's every muscle tensed and exploded with raw power as he closed the gap, zeroing in on Mandžukić just as the ball left Modrić's foot. As he finally reached the center line and caught up with the forward, he made a split-second decision fueled by sheer instincts. Zachary slid in all guns blazing and executed a perfectly timed tackle that cleanly won the ball from Mandžukić's feet. The collision also sent Mandžukić sprawling to the turf, a testament to the raw power behind the tackle. Tempers immediately flared as the Croatian players and technical staff erupted in protests, clamoring for a free-kick. They believed Zachary's challenge was overly aggressive to the point of even deserving a yellow card. However, after a moment's consideration, the referee waved away their appeals, deeming Zachary's tackle fair and well-executed.

For Zachary, there was no time to revel in his defensive triumph. With a quick glance to ensure Mandžukić was back on his feet, he immediately returned his focus to the game. The ball was finally in his possession, and he wasted no time before launching another lightning-fast counterattack, driving towards Croatia's box with speed and resolve.

The Ivorian fans cheered at the top of their lungs, clearly energized by Zachary's decisive intervention and follow-up run. On the sidelines, Coach Hervé Renard nodded approvingly, recognizing the crucial role Zachary had just played in averting a potentially dangerous situation.

Zachary's instincts took over as he danced past Ivan Rakitić, his movement fluid and deceptive. With a well-timed step-over followed by swift acceleration, he left Rakitić trailing in his wake, a testament to his SSS agility. His mind was already two steps ahead as he spotted Gervinho's well-timed run into the box.

Without hesitation, Zachary unleashed a perfectly weighted lofted pass, sending forward a ball that seemed to hang in the air for an eternity before descending like a guided missile toward the area between the defensive line and the box. Gervinho read the trajectory accurately, timing his run to perfection to stay onside.

Back on the field! Zachary's mind was only on the task at hand. He wanted to unlock Croatia's defense and create a scoring opportunity for his team. As he surged forward, his mind raced faster than his feet. He was the architect of this moment, the conductor orchestrating Ivory Coast's symphony of attack. He calculated the angles, assessed the defense, and visualized the play unfolding like a master strategist on the battlefield with every stride he took.

Croatia's defensive line had shifted, attempting to catch Ivory Coast's attackers offside. It was a tactic they had relied on in previous matches, but Zachary wasn't about to fall into their trap. His eyes darted across the field, analyzing the positioning of his teammates and the gaps in the Croatian defense.

Eric Bailly and Lamine Koné were pressing high, disrupting the rhythm of Croatia's backline. On the wings, Wilfried Zaha and Nicolas Pépé were ready to pounce, their pace and skill a constant threat. And then there was Gervinho, the seasoned forward, positioned strategically to exploit any opening.

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As the ball dropped from the heavens, Gervinho's chest met it with a delicate touch, guiding it forward into his stride. The Croatian goalkeeper rushed out, a looming obstacle in Gervinho's path, but the Ivorian forward remained composed.

Gervinho deftly rounded the keeper, leaving him stranded and grasping at thin air. The goal was gaping, an invitation that Gervinho accepted with a single-minded intent. His strike was refined and flawless, and the ball finally thundered into the back of the net with power.

The stadium erupted with cheers and applause as Gervinho wheeled away in celebration, his teammates rushing to congratulate him. But amidst the jubilation, there was a moment of apprehension as the VAR check loomed.

The replay flashed on the screens, dissecting every angle of the play. Was Gervinho onside? Did he time his run to perfection? The uncertainty weighed heavily on the Ivorians, the outcome hanging in the balance.

Fortunately, relief flooded the Ivorian fans and players as the referee's decision came through only a few seconds later. Goal confirmed! Gervinho's effort stood, and the scoreline read 1-1. Ivory Coast had finally equalized the score during the 19th minute.

Chapter 647 Another Moment of Magic

The cheers of the African fans were still echoing through the Fisht Olympic Stadium as Gervinho's jubilant celebration faded into the background. The scoreboard now read 1-1, an emblem of Ivory Coast's resilience and ability to stage a comeback. As the game restarted, anticipation hung thick in the air. Fans of both teams braced themselves for a fierce battle, expecting the teams to ramp up their attacking efforts and quickly search for the winner. But instead, the game took on a more cautious tone.

Ivory Coast, lifted by their equalizing goal, now adopted a more prudent approach. The memory of Croatia's early goal was still fresh, a brutal reminder of how quickly things could go wrong. So, they remained defensive, opting to weather through the next few minutes without taking unnecessary risks.

Zachary, Wilfried Zaha, Nicolas Pépé, and even Gervinho, who had been relentless in their offensive pursuits, were now forced to repeatedly fall back to support their defense. The Ivorian strategy had shifted; it was no longer just about scoring but also about preventing Croatia from finding the back of the net again.

Surprisingly, Coach Hervé Renard, who was often attack-minded, now supported their approach. His voice repeatedly echoed from the sidelines, urging his Ivorian players to play smart and focus on defense for the next few minutes. His tactical adjustments were evident in their play. The team had now

formed a compact unit with tight defensive lines and meticulously coordinated movements in their 4-2-3-1 formation. They weren't going to give Croatia any space to exploit.

On the other side, Croatia was not content with just sitting back. Their midfield maestros, Luka Modrić and Ivan Rakitić, continued orchestrating creative plays with their usual flair and precision. Modrić, in particular, seemed determined to break through the Ivorian defenses at all times. His eyes constantly scanned the field, looking for any opportunity to send a defense-splitting pass towards Mario Mandžukić or the speedy wingers - Ivan Perišić and Ante Rebić.

His brilliance was a threat again during the 27th minute after he received the ball near the center circle. With a quick glance upfield, he spotted Mandžukić making a run behind the Ivorian backline before unleashing yet another pass that caught the Ivorian defense off guard. Modrić's pass was another beauty of a through ball, curving and dipping perfectly into Mandžukić's path, who controlled it expertly. But before Mandžukić could pull the trigger, Eric Bailly surged forth like a storm, sliding in with a perfectly timed tackle to clear the danger. The Ivorian fans breathed a collective sigh of relief.

The game continued in this manner, a tense tactical match where every move was carefully calculated. The Ivorians defended with determination, their backline and midfielders working tirelessly to intercept passes and block shots. A few more minutes passed without much happening until Croatia had another opportunity during the 36th minute. This time around, Rakitić found himself with space just outside the box. He unleashed a powerful shot, but Sylvain Gbohouo was up to the task, diving to his right to parry the ball away. The rebound fell to Perišić, who attempted a quick follow-up, but Serge Aurier was there, blocking the shot with his body and clearing the ball to safety. But that wasn't the end of the excitement, as the failed attempt swiftly turned into a counterattacking opportunity for Ivory Coast.

Franck Kessié, one of Ivory Coast's midfielders, quickly picked up the ball before unleashing a long-range pass toward the right wing. Seemingly out of nowhere, Wilfried Zaha appeared and chested the ball down. He then raced forward like the wind and soon initiated a 2-versus-2 scenario.

Eventually, Zaha cut inside and squared the ball toward Croatia's box, where Gervinho was arriving. The captain rushed forward to tap the ball home, but his attempt lacked the power to trouble Subašić, who made a comfortable save.

As the half-time whistle approached, the usual tension that one would expect from such a stage of the World Cup had lessened, as both teams hadn't created any noteworthy opportunities over the past few minutes. And when the referee finally blew for half-time and the players walked off the field, it wasn't surprising that the score was still level at 1-1.

As the Ivorian players returned to the dressing room, a solemn air enveloped them. Coach Hervé Renard soon stood before them, his eyes ablaze with intensity. He clapped his hands to draw their attention and began his half-time pep talk.

"Listen up, men. We've already shown them we can score," Renard began, his voice steady and filled with conviction. "Gervinho's goal was just the beginning. We can do it again. We must believe in ourselves and seize every opportunity that comes our way. This game is ours for the taking, but we must stay focused."

The players nodded, absorbing his words. Renard paced the room, his gaze sweeping over each of them. "Stay disciplined. Croatia will come at us hard, but we can't afford to concede another goal. Keep your shape, stay compact, and be vigilant. We cannot let them break through."

He then shifted to tactics, pointing out adjustments on the whiteboard. "Press high when there's a chance, but fall back quickly if we lose the ball. Zachary, Zaha, Pépé, I need you to be quick on the counter. Kessié, Dié, support the defense but be ready to launch forward when needed."

With his final words, Renard raised his voice, "We're not here just to compete; we're here to win. Go out there and play with your hearts. Leave everything on that pitch."

The players responded with a resounding cheer, their spirits lifted by their coach's words. As they returned to the pitch, the atmosphere in the stadium was electric, anticipation hanging heavy in the air.

The second half kicked off, and it was clear that both teams were ready to fight tooth and nail for a place in the semi-finals. The Croatians, eager to regain their lead, started strong. In the 49th minute, Ivan Perišić found himself with space on the left wing and launched an attack. He sprinted towards the Ivorian box, but Serge Aurier was ready. Aurier stripped the ball from Perišić's feet with a perfectly timed tackle and turned over possession.

Serey Dié, positioned nearby, quickly seized the loose ball. He looked upfield and saw Zachary breaking free from his markers. Without hesitation, Dié passed the ball to Zachary, who immediately surged forward, leaving his Croatian pursuers in his wake.

On the sidelines, Croatian coach Zlatko Dalić shouted furiously at his midfielders for allowing Zachary so much space. But Zachary was in a zone, his focus unbreakable. He was moving at breakneck speed, the ball seemingly glued to his feet. He felt an exhilarating rush as if he were flying.

Ivan Rakitić came forward to intercept him, but Zachary executed a flawless step-over and accelerated past him effortlessly. Next, Luka Modrić tried to halt his progress, but Zachary deftly looped the ball over the Croatian playmaker's head and continued his run. The crowd gasped in awe as he evaded a sliding tackle and wove past another Croatian player.

Everything around him was a blur, the crowd's roar like boring roadside music fading away from his ears. Before he knew it, he was already approaching Croatia's box, and the shooting angle was opening up. His heart pounded in his chest, adrenaline coursing through his veins. Trusting his instincts, he pulled the trigger and smashed the ball with the mighty swing of his left boot.

The ball soared through the air like a missile, its wicked spin making it a formidable target for Danijel Subašić, the Croatian goalkeeper. Subašić dived and stretched out his hand, desperately attempting to save it. But the spin took the ball just beyond Subašić's reach. It ricocheted off the post with a satisfying thud before nestling into the back of the net.

The following moments saw the stadium remain eerily silent as if everyone collectively held their breath. Then, an explosion of sound erupted from the Ivorian supporters. Zachary had done it during the 50th minute, just five minutes after half-time. He had scored a spectacular goal to put Ivory Coast ahead, and the score now read 2-1. It was yet another moment of magic from him.

Zachary's teammates swarmed him, their faces alight with joy and disbelief. Gervinho, Zaha, Pépé, Kessié, and the rest – they all embraced him, patting his back and ruffling his hair. In the stands, the Ivorian fans were still cheering loudly, their voices filled with joy as they waved their flags with pride.

On the Croatian bench, Dalić looked stunned. His players, too, seemed momentarily shell-shocked. But there was no time to dwell on their misfortune. The game was far from over, and both teams knew it.

The referee signaled for the game to resume, and as the ball was placed back in the center circle, the Ivorians took a moment to catch their breath. They were finally in the lead and knew they had to hold on to it.

Renard quickly shouted instructions from the touchline, urging his players to maintain their focus and composure. He was sure of what the response of the Croatians would be. They would approach the rest of the game with renewed vigor, and his team had to be prepared for the onslaught.

Chapter 648 The Feeling of Rewriting History

The cheers within the Fisht Olympic Stadium in Sochi were deafening as the game clock ticked past the 55th minute. Ivory Coast still held onto their slender 2-1 lead courtesy of Zachary's sensational 50th-minute goal. Undeterred, the Croatians launched a series of attacks, desperately searching for an equalizer. Their pressure was relentless, and it seemed like an unending barrage of red and white shirts pushing forward for the next ten minutes.

The Ivorians, however, stood their ground with unwavering discipline. Their defenders, led by Eric Bailly and Serge Aurier, repelled wave after wave of Croatian assaults, defending like there was no tomorrow. As for the midfield, Serey Dié, Franck Kessié, and the tireless Zachary tracked back, cutting out passes and blocking shots. The entire team was locked in, their focus sharpened by the knowledge that they were incredibly close to making history.

As the clock approached the 60th minute, Croatia fashioned another golden opportunity. Ante Rebić found space on the right and whipped in a low cross towards Mario Mandžukić, who was lurking in the box. The powerful Croatian striker controlled the ball with his back to goal, spun around Lamine Koné, and fired a shot. But Sylvain Gbohou, the Ivorian goalkeeper, was equal to the task. He dived to his left, making a crucial save that denied Croatia yet again.

Croatian coach Zlatko Dalić was livid on the sidelines. He knew his team needed a spark, a change to break through the Ivorian defense. He swiftly called for two substitutions, bringing on Marcelo Brozović for Ivan Perišić and Mateo Kovačić for Andrej Kramarić. The fresh legs were meant to inject new energy and creativity into the Croatian attack.

The game resumed with an even greater intensity from Croatia. With Brozović and Kovačić on the field, the Croatians looked more dynamic, more threatening. They whipped in crosses, played intricate passes around the box, and took shots from a distance. Each attack was met with a collective gasp from the fans, a mix of anticipation and anxiety.

The Ivorians, however, were resolute. They scrambled, slid, and blocked, doing everything possible to keep the ball out of their net. But their defensive efforts came at a cost. Wilfried Kanon and Franck Kessié, two of their key players, succumbed to injuries from the relentless exertion. Kanon pulled up with a muscle strain, and Kessié, exhausted, signaled that he couldn't continue.

Hervé Renard, the Ivorian coach, quickly responded. He brought on Cheick Doukouré and Jean Michaël Seri, both defensive midfielders, for the injured players. It was a clear tactical decision to bolster the defense. Renard knew they were in the final stretch and that maintaining their lead was paramount.

The game continued, and as the match clock ticked towards the 70th minute, Croatia's attacks grew more desperate. The Ivorians were now playing with a back three supported by three defensive midfielders, two attacking wingers, Zachary, the attacking midfielder, and even Gervinho, the striker. All the Ivorian players on the pitch had fallen back, parking the bus in their half, crowding out the passing lanes, and leaving no space for the Croatians to exploit. It was a defensive wall, a bulwark against the Croatian side.

No heart patient would have stood the pressure of the Fisht Olympic Stadium at that moment. If the World Health Organization had to set safety levels, the pressure was high above the standard, a risk to anyone watching.

Every clearance by the Ivorian defenders, every save by Gbohou, was met with roars of approval from the Ivorian fans. Time seemed to slow as the clock inched towards the 80th minute. The Croatians, sensing the urgency, threw everything forward. They sent in high balls, hoping for a knockdown or a lucky break.

And finally, in one heart-stopping moment, a long cross from Brozović found Mandžukić racing toward the far post. The striker headed the ball towards the goal, and for a split second, it seemed destined for the net. But Gbohou was there again, stretching to tip the ball away. Eric Bailly scrambled to get the ball further away. But the rebound fell to Modrić, who fired a shot through a sea of bodies, only to be blocked by Bailly, who threw himself in front of the ball again.

The minutes ticked away, each feeling like an eternity in hell for the Ivorian supporters. They chanted, sang, and willed their team to hold on. Meanwhile, on the pitch, the players were running on pure adrenaline, their legs heavy but their hearts determined. Every tackle and every interception was met with cheers as they inched closer to their dream.

As the game entered stoppage time, Croatia made one final push. Modrić sent in a corner, and the ball pinballed around the box. Gbohou punched it away, but only as far as Kovačić, who volleyed it back towards goal. The shot was deflected wide, and the referee signaled for another corner. The tension was unbearable.

The corner was whipped in, but Aurier rose highest, heading the ball clear. It fell to Zaha, who sprinted upfield, taking precious seconds off the clock. The Croatian defenders chased him down, and the ball

went out for a throw-in. The referee glanced at his watch, and then moments later, he blew the final whistle.

A blaring roar erupted from the Ivorian fans. The players fell to their knees, exhausted but elated. They had done it. They had held on to their 2-1 lead and booked their place in the semi-finals of the World Cup. The Ivorian substitutes and coaches poured onto the field, their faces alight with joy. They embraced each other, their collective happiness palpable as they realized the magnitude of their achievement. Coach Hervé Renard, usually composed and tactical, was swept up in the moment. He moved from player to player, hugging them tightly, whispering congratulatory messages and words of encouragement.

Among the sea of celebrating Ivorians, Zachary stood still for a few seconds, absorbing the gravity of what they had just accomplished. The cheers from the crowd washed over him, a wave of sound and emotion that filled him with a deep sense of fulfillment. In his previous life, it had been Morocco that broke the barrier for African teams. But in this life, it was none other than Ivory Coast—a team he played for—that had made history by reaching the World Cup semi-finals first. The realization hit him hard. He had been a part of something monumental that would be remembered for generations.

His teammates surrounded him, their happiness infectious. Zachary's heart swelled with pride and determination. This victory was sweet, but he knew their journey wasn't over. His dreams were boundless, and his hunger for more success in the World Cup was insatiable. He wanted to take his team even further, to the finals, and to bring the ultimate glory to Ivory Coast.

Around him, the celebrations continued in full force. Gervinho, who had scored the equalizer, was lifted high by his teammates. Eric Bailly and Serge Aurier shared a heartfelt embrace, their contributions in defense evidently a crucial factor in their victory.

Wilfried Zaha and Nicolas Pépé danced with the substitutes on the sidelines, their moves reflecting the rhythm of victory that beat in every Ivorian heart.

The fans in the stands were no less exuberant. They sang, chanted, and waved their flags with an infectious energy. Many had tears of joy streaming down their faces, overwhelmed by the pride and happiness of seeing their national team achieve such an incredible feat. The sense of unity was overwhelming; it was a moment where every Ivorian and African, whether on the pitch, in the stands, or back in their homes before their screens, felt connected by a shared dream and triumph.

Chapter 649 Stage Set for the World Cup Semi-Finals

649 Stage Set for the World Cup Semi-Finals

Zachary was finally drawn back into the fray by his teammates. They clapped him on the back, congratulating him for his pivotal role in their victory. His goal in the 50th minute had been a turning point, a moment of magic that shifted the momentum in their favor. But Zachary understood that it was not just his brilliance but the relentless team effort that brought them this far. Every player had given their all, and that collective pursuit of glory had seen them through.

Coach Renard gathered the team in a huddle on the field. His voice, usually calm and instructive, was filled with emotion. "You have made history today," he told them. "But this is just the beginning. Believe in yourselves. Believe in each other, and we can achieve even greater things. The finals are within our reach."

The Ivorian players responded with a resounding cheer. They were ready to take on whatever came next. Their journey was far from over, and they were determined to make the most of it. As they broke from the huddle, they waved to the fans, acknowledging their support and sharing the moment.

Zachary took a deep breath, letting the moment sink in. The noise, the colors, and the joy! It was all a blur of happiness and achievement. But amid the celebrations, his focus remained sharp. He knew this was a stepping stone, a significant one, but a step nonetheless towards their ultimate goal. The finals were in sight, and with the momentum they had, anything was possible.

As the team made their way back to the dressing room, the chants of the Ivorian fans followed them, a constant reminder of the support and love that drove them forward. Zachary walked with his head held high, his heart filled with pride. This was a moment he would cherish forever! It was a moment he knew had rewritten history.

In the dressing room, the celebrations continued. The players laughed, sang, and reveled in their victory. Coach Renard, still beaming with pride, urged them to savor the moment while keeping their eyes fixed on the future. "Celebrate tonight," he said. "But when tomorrow comes, our focus shifts to the next challenge. There's more history to be made."

Zachary nodded along with his teammates, a determined smile on his face. The journey had been long and arduous, but the taste of victory was sweet. And with the support of their fans and the strength of their unity, they were ready to conquer whatever lay ahead.

Meanwhile, the post-match show on BBC One began, and the screen cut to the iconic studio, where Gary Lineker, the seasoned presenter, sat alongside an esteemed panel of pundits. The atmosphere echoed with remnant bouts of excitement following Ivory Coast's historic 2-1 victory over Croatia. The panel featured former football stars Rio Ferdinand, Alan Shearer, Didier Drogba, Jermaine Jenas, Jürgen Klinsmann, and Gabby Logan, each ready to dissect the thrilling quarter-final match.

Gary Lineker opened the discussion with his trademark smile, "Welcome back to our World Cup post-match analysis. What a game we just witnessed! Ivory Coast has made history by reaching the semi-finals, and it was a match filled with drama, skill, and determination. Let's dive right into it."

Alan Shearer, the legendary striker, was quick to share his thoughts. "What a performance from Ivory Coast! And what a game from Zachary. He was absolutely sensational today. His assist for the first goal was exquisite, and that solo effort for the second goal—simply world-class."

Rio Ferdinand nodded in agreement. "Zachary's ability to drive through the midfield and take on opponents was outstanding. That run where he dribbled past the entire Croatian midfield before scoring was a moment of pure magic. It reminds me of Ronaldinho's performances in his prime, and it's the kind of play that can change the course of a match."

Didier Drogba, the Ivorian legend, beamed with pride. "As an Ivorian, I couldn't be prouder. Zachary has been phenomenal this entire tournament. He now has six goals, and his performance today showed why he's a contender for both the Golden Boot and the Golden Ball. But it wasn't just him—every Ivorian player gave their all."

Jermaine Jenas added, "Absolutely, Didier. The whole team was solid. Their defense was resilient, and their midfield controlled the game well. Even when Croatia was piling on the pressure, the Ivorians held their ground. It was a complete team effort."

Gary Lineker then steered the conversation towards the upcoming semi-finals. "After the historic quarter-final win against Croatia, Ivory Coast will face England, who secured a 2-0 victory over Sweden earlier today. Let's talk about that. Rio, Alan, how do you see this match-up?"

Alan Shearer leaned forward, a hint of patriotic excitement in his voice. "England has been fantastic so far, and I believe we have the quality to reach the final. Our defense has been solid, and our attacking options are potent. But we must be cautious. Ivory Coast has shown they're not to be underestimated."

Rio Ferdinand chipped in, "England will need to be at their best. Zachary is a player who can change the game in an instant, and we've seen how effective Ivory Coast can be both defensively and offensively. It's going to be a tough match."

Didier Drogba couldn't hide his confidence in his country's chances. "England is strong, no doubt. But Ivory Coast has heart, and they have Zachary, who's been a game-changer. If they play with the same spirit and discipline they showed today, they can beat England."

Jürgen Klinsmann, the former German striker, offered his perspective. "It's going to be an intriguing match. England has the quality and depth, but Ivory Coast has momentum and a belief that's hard to quantify. If they can harness that energy and Zachary continues his form, they could surprise everyone."

Gabby Logan then shifted the focus to the other semi-final. "Let's not forget about France versus Belgium in the other semi-final. They are two strong teams with incredible depth and several individual talents! What are your thoughts on that match, Jürgen?"

Klinsmann responded, "That match is a heavyweight clash. France has been clinical, and their depth is impressive. Belgium, on the other hand, has shown they can beat anyone on their day. It's too close to call, but I'm leaning slightly towards France due to their overall squad strength."

Gary Lineker wrapped up the segment, "So, to summarize, we have two exciting semi-finals coming up. Ivory Coast vs. England and France vs. Belgium. The World Cup continues to deliver thrills and unforgettable moments. Thank you, gentlemen, for your insights."

As the show continued, the panelists further dissected the nuances of the Ivory Coast vs. Croatia match, replaying key moments and discussing tactical decisions. They highlighted Zachary's brilliance, the team's defensive resilience, and the pivotal saves by Sylvain Gbohouo.

The conversation naturally flowed back to the semi-finals, with each pundit sharing their predictions and analyses. The excitement and expectations were high, as the World Cup's final stages promised more drama and spectacular football.

The show concluded with a montage of highlights from the day's matches, set to a stirring soundtrack, reminding viewers of the beauty and unpredictability of the World Cup. As the camera panned out, Gary

Lineker signed off with a smile, "Join us again for the semi-finals. It's going to be unforgettable. Good night for now!"

In the show's aftermath, the jubilant sights in the Fisht Olympic Stadium in Sochi, Russia, and brief insanely triumphant scenes of the streets back in Abidjan, the capital of Ivory Coast, flashed by on the screen. Fans were shown celebrating their team's historic achievement, their flags waving high and their voices echoing with prideful songs.

Chapter 650 Injury Worries and Rising Tension

650 Injury Worries and Rising Tension

Over the following three days, Coach Renard remained in the thick of the action, molding his players for the upcoming crucial semi-final clash against England. The pressure was sky-high as the Ivorian players pushed themselves on the training ground, acutely aware that their next match would determine the fate of their World Cup dreams. However, the team faced an additional hurdle with three injured crucial players.

Franck Kessié, the dynamic midfielder, was nursing a knock and would not recover and be fully fit for the semi-final. Wilfred Kanon and Gervinho, the team captain and inspirational leader, were also out due to muscle complications. Their absence was a blow for the Ivorian team, which didn't have a great depth of talented and experienced players in the squad. But Coach Renard didn't waste time dwelling on misfortune and had already devised a plan to compensate for his missing starting players.

Cheick Doukouré, a stalwart in the defensive midfield, and Adama Traoré, a reliable left-back, were set to step into their natural positions. Salomon Kalou, the seasoned forward, would take up the right wing, while the versatile Wilfried Zaha would be moved to the striking line. Renard had initially considered pushing Zachary forward to the striking line. But he had quickly dismissed the idea, recognizing that Zachary's presence was crucial in the midfield.

Three days passed in a blur of focus, and today was the last day of training as it was the eve of their semi-final against England. But Coach Hervé Renard remained focused as he stood on the sidelines, his gaze sharp as he observed his team's last intensive training session.

The past few practice sessions had also been grueling but necessary as he integrated the three players replacing his injured starters for the semi-final against England. The coach understood one fact. For the Ivory Coast team to stand a chance against England, Cheick Doukouré, Salomon Kalou, and Adama Traoré had to coordinate seamlessly with their teammates to avoid any mistakes during the crucial moments of the upcoming match.

Renard was meticulous in his approach, even during that last practice session. He put the team through intense drills, ensuring the replacements could seamlessly blend into the game plan without a hitch. His voice carried across the training ground, a constant reminder to maintain discipline and precision. The players responded with determination, pushing themselves to their limits under the watchful eyes of their coach.

Cheick Doukouré, stepping into the defensive midfield role, demonstrated his ability to read the game and break up opposition attacks. Adama Traoré, taking up the left-back position, showcased his defensive prowess and ability to support the attack through the flanks. Salomon Kalou, the veteran forward, brought experience and a calm presence on the right wing, while Wilfried Zaha effortlessly adapted to his new role as a striker.

Renard also emphasized the importance of finding Zachary, the team's playmaker, whenever they had possession. Zachary had been the linchpin of the Ivorian attack throughout the tournament, his vision and skill creating numerous scoring opportunities. The coach drilled this strategy into the players' minds, ensuring that they would instinctively look for Zachary in crucial moments.

As the evening approached, Renard decided to end the training session early. He wanted his players to rest and recharge for the monumental task ahead. Gathering them around, he spoke with a mix of authority and encouragement.

"Well done, everyone," Renard said, his voice steady. "You've worked hard, and we're ready. Remember everything we've practiced. Stay disciplined, stay focused, and stay sharp. Trust in each other, and we will succeed."

Interrupting with a playful tone, Eric Bailly quipped, "Let's not forget to always look for Zachary whenever we're on the ball. Right, coach?"

A hush fell over the training ground as the coach shot Eric Bailly a disapproving look. Just as tension mounted and the players feared the worst, a smile graced Renard's lips. "You're absolutely right, Eric," Renard remarked casually. "Whenever we have possession, we need to seek out Zachary. He's the one who drives our team. Thanks for sharing, Eric. Now, could you do fifty push-ups for me?" His expression turned serious as he locked eyes with Bailly.

"Aye, coach," Bailly responded and got down to it. The rest of the players chuckled as he began doing the push-ups, his speed so fast that he was doing almost two sets per three seconds. Before long, he finished the required number of push-ups and rejoined his teammates.

Renard smiled and continued his speech. "We've put in the work. You've shown incredible dedication and skill these past few days. So, I'll tell you these words again. Trust in yourselves, trust in each other, and trust in the plan. We're ready for tomorrow. Now, get some rest and focus. This is our moment."

With that, he dismissed them. The players quickly washed up, and the locker room filled with the sounds of water running and muted conversations. The tension was omnipresent, weighing down the Ivorian players like a heavy mountain. But so was the camaraderie as they knew they were on the cusp of something historic. They just had to get past England in the following day's semi-final.

Zachary had been quiet and solemn during training. But he finally started conversing with his teammates as they boarded the bus back to the hotel. They chatted animatedly about the upcoming match between France and Belgium, each offering their predictions on who would emerge victorious.

"I think France will edge it," said Doukouré, leaning back in his seat.

"Belgium's attack is too strong," countered Zaha. "De Bruyne and Lukaku are in top form."

Zachary listened, a slight smile playing on his lips. The banter was a welcome distraction from the pressure of their impending game.

When they arrived at the hotel, the team headed straight to the dining room for an early dinner. The mood was lighter now, the players laughing and joking as they ate. The familiar rituals and routines were comforting and a reminder of the journey they had undertaken together.

After dinner, they dispersed to their rooms, each player retreating into their own space to relax and mentally prepare.

Zachary switched on his phone, which immediately buzzed with several messages. His acquaintances, including Kristin, Emily, Kasongo, Bjørn Peters, Inger, and his biological mother and stepsister, had all sent their best wishes for the game.

He chuckled, particularly at the message from Emily, his agent. Her text was as professional as ever, but there was also warmth there that made him smile. He decided to call her.

"Hey, Emily," he greeted when she picked up. "Got your message. So, are you rooting for England or us tomorrow?"

Emily sighed dramatically. "Zachary, you know I have to support my nation. But as your agent, I'll always root for you. So, let's just say I'm in a bit of a conflict here."

Zachary laughed. "Fair enough. I'll take what I can get. How's everything on your end?"

They talked for a while, catching up on the latest news about Kristin and other mutual acquaintances. Emily filled him in on some developments in the sports world, and they shared a few laughs. It was a way to unwind and momentarily shift focus from the mounting pressure.

Time flew by, and before he knew it, Zachary glanced at his watch and realized it was nearly 9:00 PM. The semi-final between France and Belgium was about to begin.

"I should go, Emily. The game's about to start."

"Alright, Zachary. Give it your all tomorrow. We're all cheering for you."

"Thanks, Emily. Talk soon."

He hung up and headed to the hotel bar, where a large screen had been set up for the players to watch the match. The bar was already humming with pre-game excitement as his teammates gathered, eager to see who could be their potential opponents in the final.