

Greatest 651

Chapter 651 Mental Preparation

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Zachary quickly found a spot in the bar as the game kicked off. He settled into his seat, his eyes glued to the screen as the semi-final between France and Belgium began.

From the onset, Belgium dominated. Their play was fluid and dynamic, weaving intricate patterns across the pitch. Kevin De Bruyne and Eden Hazard orchestrated attacks with masterful precision, slicing through the French defense time after time. The bar erupted in gasps with each near miss, the tension mounting with every passing minute.

Despite Belgium's relentless pressure, France's defense held firm. Hugo Lloris made several crucial saves, and his reflexes and positioning were impeccable. Then, in the 52nd minute, the moment came. A corner for France. Antoine Griezmann delivered a perfect cross into the box, and Samuel Umtiti rose above the Belgian defenders to meet it. His header was powerful and precise, sending the ball past Thibaut Courtois and into the back of the net.

Zachary wasn't surprised by the turn of events. He had witnessed this moment in his past life, a strange déjà vu that left him feeling nostalgic and determined. He sighed, reflecting on how unpredictable football could be. Despite Belgium dominating most of the game, France found the net, securing their place in the final.

Time whirled by, and as the final whistle sounded, confirming France's victory, Zachary stood up and stretched. His mind was already shifting to the next day's challenge. The lesson from the evening was clear: in football, dominance doesn't always translate to victory. It was an encouraging reminder that even if the Ivorians couldn't dominate the stronger English side, they could still win.

Zachary turned to his teammates, who were still buzzing with post-match discussions. "Goodnight, everyone," he called out, garnering a few nods and waves in return. He left the bar, walking briskly back to his hotel room.

Once inside, Zachary closed the door and leaned against it for a few seconds while taking a deep breath. The day had been long! Tomorrow promised to be even more intense. But he was ready.

With a calm settling over him, he changed into his nightwear, brushed his teeth, and crawled into bed, his mind replaying the training sessions and tactics discussed over the past few days.

His phone buzzed with a few more messages of support from friends and former teammates, which he quickly skimmed through, smiling at their words of encouragement. He replied with a quick thank you before setting his phone aside.

As he lay there, the day's events slowly faded from his mind. He knew that a good night's rest was crucial—not just for him to perform—but for the entire team. They would need every ounce of energy and focus to face England tomorrow night. Zachary closed his eyes, letting the day's fatigue wash over him.

In the silence of his room, he allowed himself a moment of quiet reflection. This World Cup had been an incredible journey, and the semi-final was another step towards the ultimate goal. He felt a deep sense of pride and responsibility since he carried his team's hopes.

With those thoughts, he drifted into a restful sleep, ready to face whatever challenges the following day would bring. The night passed, and the dawn of a monumental day arrived. Zachary woke up later than usual, the weight of the upcoming match still heavy on his mind. He moved through his morning routine with a deliberate calmness. Breakfast was a quiet affair, a simple meal that provided the necessary fuel for the day ahead. After eating, he went through a light yoga session, stretching his muscles and focusing his mind. A short gym session followed, just enough to keep his body agile without overexerting himself.

The rest of the day was spent in restful preparation. Zachary mostly stayed in his room, reading, meditating, and visualizing the game ahead. Meal times provided brief interludes where he interacted with his teammates, sharing knowing glances and quiet words of encouragement. There was a barely suppressed pressure in the air, a mix of excitement and anxiety everyone felt.

As evening descended, the team gathered to board the bus that would take them to the Luzhniki Stadium in Moscow. The atmosphere inside the bus was thick, with even more stress levels. No one spoke; each player was lost in their thoughts, mentally preparing for the challenge that awaited them. The streets of Moscow flew by outside the windows - but inside the bus, time seemed to stretch endlessly with the silence reigning supreme.

When they finally arrived at the stadium, they were greeted by a deafening roar. The sea of fans was much larger than they had ever seen before. Ivorian flags waved proudly, and the support was

overwhelming. It wasn't just Ivory Coast's fans but the whole of Africa rallying behind them. Supporters from Nigeria, Cameroon, Senegal, and other African nations had gathered to support the last African team in the World Cup.

The following minutes blurred past quickly as the Ivorian players headed to the pitch and went through their pre-game warm-up. And when they finally finished stretching their muscles and returned to the locker room, the tension grew even more palpable. 23:16

Zachary felt even more yearning to secure a victory for Ivory Coast as he waved to the fans. Their cheers and chants filled the air, a powerful reminder of what was at stake. He followed his teammates and coaches into the stadium, the noise from the outside crowd fading as they moved into the inner sanctum of the arena.

The following minutes blurred past quickly as the Ivorian players headed to the pitch and went through their pre-game warm-up. And when they finally finished stretching their muscles and returned to the locker room, the tension grew even more palpable. Coach Hervé Renard gathered the players for a final pep talk. His voice was steady and calm, instilling confidence and focus in each player. He reminded them of their journey, of the hard work and sacrifices that had brought them to this moment. He spoke of belief, discipline, and the importance of every single play.

Zachary's mind was a whirlwind of thoughts, yet he remained laser-focused on the task ahead. He visualized the field, the positions, and the movements. He thought about the strategies they had practiced and the weaknesses they had identified in the English defense. He felt the weight of expectation but also the fire of determination.

As they suited up and prepared to step onto the field, the noise from the stadium crowd filtered back into their consciousness. It was almost time. The final checks were made, and the teams quickly lined up in the tunnel, ready to emerge into the cauldron of the Luzhniki Stadium.

The walk onto the pitch was surreal, with England in their customary white jerseys and Ivory Coast in their traditional orange colors. The cheers were deafening, the energy almost tangible as all the English star players, including Harry Kane, Kyle Walker, Ashley Young, and others, lined up on the field.

Zachary felt an adrenaline rush, his senses heightened, every nerve ending tingling with anticipation as he swept his gaze over his opponents. He then glanced at his teammates, seeing the same determination mirrored in their eyes.

The national anthems played, and Zachary's anticipation rose to even greater levels. This was more than a game; it was a historic moment, a chance to make history for Ivory Coast and Africa. As the anthems concluded, the players shook hands, and the captains exchanged pennants.

The stadium erupted again, and Zachary took his position on the field. His mind was clear, his body ready. The semi-final against England was about to begin, and he was determined to give everything he had to help his team reach the final.

Chapter 652 A Surprisingly Self-Destructive England

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The Luzhniki Stadium in Moscow was fully packed with fans brimming with anticipation. They were all waiting to witness the historic World Cup semi-final game between England and Ivory Coast.

On one side stood the English team, a formidable array of talent donned in their pristine white jerseys. Jordan Pickford, Kyle Walker, Harry Maguire, Jordan Henderson, Kieran Trippier, Jesse Lingard, Ashley Young, Raheem Sterling, and the highly clinical Harry Kane, among other talents, were ready to take on the challenge ahead. Meanwhile, on the opposite side, the Ivorian players, clad in their striking orange kits, were equally prepared. Among them were Eric Bailly, Zachary Bemba, Wilfried Zaha, and Nicolas Pépé, all poised and ready for the World Cup semi-final battle.

Seconds passed, and as the clock struck 9:00 PM, the referee's whistle sounded, signaling the start of the highly anticipated semi-final clash. Harry Kane, England's talismanic striker, booted the ball back to his midfield, kicking off the game. The fervent supporters of both teams immediately erupted in cheers and chants, the noise reverberating like thunder.

Jordan Henderson, England's defensive midfielder, received the ball from Kane before swiftly passing it to Ashley Young on the left wing. But the Ivorians were not content to sit back and watch England dominate them. They surged forward like a pack of wolves on the hunt, with Wilfried Zaha leading the charge in a high press. However, the English players remained composed in the face of the pressure. They quickly demonstrated their expertise and poise by calmly passing the ball within short to medium distances. They organized themselves into a 3-1-4-2 structure and retained control while aiming to initiate their offensive moves from the back.

Minutes ticked by with England dictating the tempo, their crisp passing and controlled play hinting at a strategy designed to wear down the Ivorians. But in the seventh minute, a shift in momentum occurred.

Seeing an opportunity to breach the Ivorian midfield, Dele Alli drove forward, rushing from deep within midfield towards Ivory Coast's territory. However, his run was abruptly halted by Zachary Bamba, who read the play perfectly and forced Dele Alli to retreat. With the Ivorian press intensifying, Dele Alli played the ball back to Harry Maguire on the left side of the box.

The situation turned from bad to worse for England as Salomon Kalou, Ivory Coast's right winger for the night, was already hot on Maguire's heels, his high pressing adding to the mounting pressure on the defender. But Maguire sensed the danger and chose the safer route, passing the ball back to Jordan Pickford, the England goalkeeper. Everything seemed calm as the ball rolled toward the English goalkeeper, a routine maneuver meant to reset England's structure. But just suddenly, something unexpected unfolded in that instant.

It was Wilfried Zaha, who was lurking with predatory instincts, that took action. He seized the moment, and as the ball made its way to Pickford, he accelerated, appearing at the edge of the box as if from thin air.

The spectators collectively held their breath, the tension real and tangible as the unexpected situation caught everyone watching unawares. Even players of both teams watched with wide eyes as Zaha and Pickford sprinted toward the ball, eager to gain the advantage. But at the end of it all, Zaha's speed and anticipation gave him the edge.

Zaha eventually reached the ball first and controlled it deftly mid-stride. His first touch was immaculate, a slight nudge with the outside of his boot that barely allowed him to glide past Pickford with an elegance that belied the high stakes of the moment. With the English keeper now out of position and grasping at thin air, Zaha faced a tight angle, but his composure was unwavering. He raised his leg, and with a delicate chip, he sent the ball sailing into the back of the net to score Ivory Coast's 1st goal of the night during the 8th minute.

Silence!

For a split second, there was numbing silence—a collective intake of breath from the stunned English players and their supporters. Then, the realization hit, and the Ivorian section of the stadium erupted in euphoric celebration. The score read 1-0 in favor of Ivory Coast, and Wilfried Zaha ran off to celebrate the goal.

The English players were visibly shocked, their faces showing their dismay. Their early dominance was undone by one mistake, a mistimed pass, and Zaha's opportunistic brilliance that sealed the deal for

Ivory Coast. At that moment, expectations of an overpowering English performance were suddenly thrown into disarray, and the crowd could feel the seismic shift in the game's momentum. Not many could believe the turn of events.

As Zaha ran towards the corner flag, arms outstretched and face alight with joy, he was joined by his Ivorian teammates in a spirited celebration. The Ivorians had drawn first blood in a manner that sent a clear message: they were here to fight, and they were more than capable of causing an upset in the semi-final.

Meanwhile, as the celebrations went on, the commentators' voices filled the airwaves, capturing the moment. "Wilfried Zaha has just put Ivory Coast ahead in the 8th minute!" Clive Tyldesley, one of the commentators, exclaimed. "An incredible turn of events here! England, known for their composure, has self-destructed. Harry Maguire's error gifted Zaha the perfect opportunity, and he didn't miss!"

"Credit must also go to Hervé Renard," Glenn Hoddle, another commentator, chimed in. "His tactical vision has paid off brilliantly. With Gervinho injured, placing Zaha up front seems like a masterstroke."

Back to the pitch, the Ivorian players were jubilant, their celebration prolonged. Zachary hugged Zaha and said, "Well done, Wilfried! That was brilliant!" he exclaimed, patting Zaha on the back. Zaha, still grinning ear to ear, nodded appreciatively.

A minute later, the brief celebration was finally over after the repeated urges of the referee, and the players quickly reset their focus. The lead was theirs, but the match was far from over. Zachary immediately stepped up to become the team motivator in the absence of the injured Gervinho. He gathered his teammates for a quick huddle. "Alright, we're in the lead now. Let's stay sharp and keep our heads. Zaha, keep pressing those center-backs. They're already shaken and under pressure. They could make another mistake if you continue ruffling their feathers."

Zaha nodded, determination etched on his face. "Got it, Zachary. Let's keep pushing."

The players marched back to their positions, a renewed sense of purpose in their steps. The cheers from the crowd slowly faded into the background as the referee signaled for the game to resume.

Chapter 653 A Shocking Turn of Events

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England looked visibly shaken by the early setback and were eager to reclaim their composure. Harry Kane restarted the game and passed the ball back to Jordan Henderson, who immediately sought to reestablish control.

The England players built up from there, and for the next few minutes, they worked tirelessly, trying to rebuild their rhythm. They passed the ball around the back and midfield, hoping to set the tempo and regain control. The Ivorians, however, remained relentless in their press. Zaha followed Zachary's advice to the letter and hounded Harry Maguire and John Stones, the English center-backs. His off-ball runs were relentless. They repeatedly forced the English defenders to play quicker than they were comfortable with.

But that was not all, as Zachary, Serey Dié, and the newly introduced Cheick Doukouré were also working hard in midfield. They ran at the English midfielders like mad, giving them no seconds on the ball. They high-pressed like there was no tomorrow and ensured that 'not a single' England player had the time to make any crucial decision that could hurt Ivory Coast.

With their backs against the wall, the English players quickly adapted their strategy, shifting to aggressive wing-play tactics. Kieran Trippier and Ashley Young began making daring runs down the flanks, sending cross after cross into the box in search of their star striker, Harry Kane. However, the Ivorian defense remained resolute and well-organized. Serge Aurier, Eric Bailly, and Lamine Koné were as tenacious as ever at the back. They repeatedly thwarted these attempts, keeping Kane under tight surveillance and clearing all the dangerous balls.

As the game reached the 29th minute, a significant shift in momentum occurred. England earned a corner kick after a relentless attack. The anticipation around the stadium mounted as Ashley Young stepped up to take the corner. His delivery was precise, and he sent the ball spiraling into the crowded Ivorian box with a nasty curl. What followed was a fierce aerial battle. Players jostled and leaped, hoping to connect with the incoming corner ball. But it was Cheick Doukouré, the recently introduced defensive midfielder, who rose highest. Towering over three English players, Doukouré headed the ball with a commanding presence, sending it flying out of the danger zone.

The ball soared beyond the box, finding Salomon Kalou lurking on the edge, who deftly chested it down. With Jesse Lingard closing in, Kalou turned smoothly, leaving the English midfielder in his wake. He spotted Zachary Bemba running into an unmarked pocket of space outside the eighteen-yard box and played the ball to him.

Zachary's heart raced as he received the pass. He knew this was a golden opportunity to extend their lead. Without hesitation, he began his daring run through the middle. His movements were graceful yet

rapid, a blur of orange slicing through the white shirts of the English midfield press. He danced past one player, then another, his speed, agility, and side-steps leaving them in his wake. With the pitch now opened up, he swiftly advanced the counterattack, his long strides eating up yards of space by the second.

The crowd's roar grew louder as Zachary approached the edge of the box. He could almost taste the goal, but then, out of nowhere, Kyle Walker lunged in with a ruthless sliding tackle. The contact was hard, sending Zachary tumbling to the ground. Cries of dismay erupted from the Ivorian bench and their fans. The referee wasted no time, blowing his whistle and pointing to the spot of the foul. He reached into his pocket and produced a yellow card for Walker, much to the dissatisfaction of the English supporters.

Zachary lay on the ground for a few seconds, catching his breath and assessing the damage. Thankfully, he was unhurt. He got to his feet, brushing off his teammates' concerned glances. The free-kick spot was just twenty-eight yards out—an excellent position for a set-piece specialist like Zachary. His Dead-Ball Specialist Juju could be put to use again.

He blocked out everything around him and placed the ball carefully, his mind focused and clear. The wall of English players lined up, and Jordan Pickford, the English goalkeeper, positioned himself, eyes locked on Zachary. The tension in the stadium was mounting, but Zachary was as calm as ever. His SS+ Composure and Mental Strength kept him above all the pressure as his similarly highly-graded Tactical Awareness and Risk Assessment attributes helped him assess the situation before him.

Having studied the goings on in England's box, Zachary took a deep breath, his eyes scanning the goal. He had practiced this countless times. He knew he had to make this opportunity count, as a one-goal lead was precarious against a team as formidable as England. He took a few steps back, then ran up and struck the ball with precision and skill honed over thousands or even ten thousands of times on the training ground. His Dead Ball Specialist Juju, combined with his SS-graded game intelligence, all worked like a charm, and the ball soared over the wall, curling towards the top right corner.

Pickford dived, his fingertips grazing the ball, but it wasn't enough. The ball kissed the underside of the crossbar and nestled into the back of the net. For the second time that night, the stadium fell silent for just a moment in awe of Ivory Coast's efforts. And then, just as abruptly, the African fans erupted into thunderous cheers, vuvuzelas blowing and chaotic dances filling the stands.

Ivory Coast had stunned England again and doubled their lead to 2-0 during the 32nd minute. Zachary's teammates swarmed him, their joy unrestrained. They almost couldn't believe they were already leading by two goals against one of the best teams in Europe after just over half an hour of gameplay.

On the sidelines, Coach Hervé Renard pumped his fists in the air, his tactical decisions paying off. The commentators were also in awe. "What a sensational free-kick by Zachary Bamba! Ivory Coast has doubled their lead, and it's that man again making the difference! Ivory Coast is now 2-0 up against England. This is incredible!"

"The precision, the confidence—Zachary has been nothing short of spectacular during this World Cup campaign," another commentator added. "He has done it again tonight, and England has a mountain to climb now."

The celebrations eventually ended, and as the players reset for the restart, Zachary's mind was already on the next play. There were still many minutes of the game on the clock, and he knew they couldn't afford to relax, not even for a second. His focus was unwavering, his desire to help Ivory Coast reach the World Cup final driving him forward.

As they retook their positions, Zachary yelled and encouraged his teammates to stay focused and keep pressing hard. The game was theirs to win, and with each passing minute, the dream of reaching the World Cup final would grow closer to reality.

Chapter 654 The Usually-Notoriously Tricky 2-0 Lead

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The intensity on the pitch was mounting with each passing second as the semi-final between Ivory Coast and England continued in the Luzhniki Stadium. The scoreboard showed 2-0 in favor of the Ivorians, thanks to Wilfried Zaha's opportunistic brilliance and Zachary Bamba's sensational free-kick. However, England's determination was unwavering, especially with the match still in the first half. They weren't ready to surrender.

In the 36th minute, England prepared to launch another offensive. John Stones initiated the move, passing to Jordan Henderson. Henderson, with a quick glance up, found Dele Alli. Alli did not waste any time and played a swift pass to Jesse Lingard. Lingard felt Zachary closing in and, after a single touch, released the ball to Kieran Trippier on the right wing.

Trippier, known for his speed and daring runs, raced down the touchline. Adama Traoré, Ivory Coast's left-back for the day, sprinted forward to intercept. But Trippier executed a slick one-two with Raheem Sterling, and they seamlessly cut into the pitch, leaving Adama in the dust. Sterling, now with the ball,

dribbled past Lamine Koné with ease, leaving the Ivorian center-back in his wake. As he entered the box, the cheers from the English fans reached a fever pitch.

The English fans could almost smell the goal coming as Sterling raised his leg to unleash a shot. But just at the last moment, a silhouette slid in, blocking the ball and sending it out for a corner kick. The hero was Serge Aurier, whose timely intervention saved the day.

The pressure on Ivory Coast continued mounting. England quickly set up for the corner, and Kieran Trippier sent in a curling ball, creating chaos in the box. Bodies clashed, and the uncertainty about who would come out on top was all around the danger zone. Eventually, Harry Maguire towered over everyone and got the decisive touch, heading the ball toward the inside of the right post. Time seemed to slow as the ball flew through the air, destined for the back of the net. But before it could cross the line, Serge Aurier was there again, intercepting and booting it away from the danger zone.

The ball soared high and landed out of play on the left touchline for a throw-in. The African fans sighed with relief while the Ivorian players exchanged high-fives, celebrating their defensive effort. But Zachary couldn't shake off his worry, as a 2-0 lead was usually notoriously tricky. If England managed to pull one goal back, the momentum could shift dramatically. The English team would be invigorated, believing they were within striking distance of a comeback. Zachary knew they had to maintain their solid defense and prevent England from scoring for as long as possible. But that wasn't enough. They also had to continue looking for opportunities to launch counterattacks on England's defense and force the opponents to feel some pressure. And if possible, they had to score another goal to seal the deal.

As the game resumed, the tension in the stadium remained electric. England, increasingly desperate to claw their way back, pressed harder. Their passes were crisper, and their runs more aggressive. They showcased the English attacking game, pushing all the Ivorians, except Wilfried Zaha, into their half. They were going all out to find a way back into the semi-final.

On the other hand, the Ivory Coast players remained vigilant, aware of the stakes. They were disciplined as they formed neat defensive lines with their 4-2-3-1 formation as they defended. And just like that, the minutes ticked by with England dominating possession, but the Ivorian defense, led by Serge Aurier and Eric Bailly, stood firm.

In the 39th minute, another English attack began, prompting more cheers from the watching crowd. Henderson, always reliable, played a long ball to Raheem Sterling. Sterling controlled it expertly and sprinted down the right flank. Cheick Doukouré rushed out of midfield to stop the attack, but Sterling had other plans. He sent in a dangerous cross aimed at Harry Kane. The English striker leaped, but Eric Bailly rose higher, clearing the ball with a powerful header. The just-cleared ball fell to Jesse Lingard,

who unleashed a volley from a few yards outside the box. The shot was fierce, curling dangerously towards the inside of the left post. But Sylvain Gbohouo, the Ivorian goalkeeper, made a spectacular save, diving to his right to palm the ball away.

The England faithful and players groaned with frustration, lamenting yet another missed chance. Their dismay was mounting as they could see the clock ticking away, yet their team was still trailing by two goals.

Meanwhile, the Ivorians regrouped quickly, with Sylvain Gbohouo yelling and shouting words of encouragement to his teammates. He urged his teammates to stay composed while holding their lines and seizing any counterattacking opportunities that came their way. The game was far from over, and every second counted.

Minutes ticked by, and as the half-time whistle approached, England threw everything they had at the Ivorian defense. Trippier and Young continued their relentless runs, and Henderson and Alli pushed forward with intent. But the Ivorian defense, bolstered by their midfield, remained unyielding.

The 44th minute eventually arrived, with the Ivorian players 'very much' looking towards the half-time break. But it was then that another shift in momentum occurred as Sterling found himself in a promising position just outside of the box after receiving a pinpoint pass from Harry Kane.

In a flash of brilliance, Raheem Sterling dribbled past Cheick Doukouré and Lamine Koné before pulling the trigger from the edge of the box. His technique and accuracy rang true, and for a moment, the ball looked destined for the inside of the far post. But it then curled slightly and smashed off the post before rebounding into Sylvain Gbohouo's waiting hands.

It was another missed chance, with the goalpost doing the work this time!

The Ivorians sighed with relief as Sylvain Gbohouo restarted the gameplay with a long goal kick. Midfielders geared up to meet the ball and win the advantage for their teams. But right then, the referee blew the whistle, signaling the end of the first half.

It was time for the half-time break, and the Ivory Coast players headed off the pitch while still leading England 2-0 in the World Cup semi-final. Relief washed over them as they made their way to the

dressings room, and as they arrived, they exchanged high-fives and fist bumps before settling down to quench their thirst.

Hervé Renard, their coach, quickly took center stage. "Well done, everyone," he began, his voice steady but intense. "You handled the first half brilliantly, and we're leading England by two goals. But remember, we can't afford to be overly conservative in the second half. Keep defending strongly, but look for opportunities to break past England's defense. We need to make them feel threatened."

The players nodded, absorbing his words, and Renard continued with a few more encouraging remarks. He urged them to remain disciplined, play as a team, and play their hearts out on the pitch. He then gave a few personal instructions to some of the players before eventually sending them back to the pitch. The second half began soon after, and England resumed their relentless pursuit of a goal, pushing forward and launching attack after attack. The Ivorians defended tenaciously, thwarting most of the offensives. But as the minutes ticked by, exhaustion began to set in, leading to occasional mistakes.

Sylvain Gbohouo, Ivory Coast's goalkeeper, remained a fortress, comfortably saving every shot that came his way. He was now the acting captain in the absence of the injured Gervinho. His team spirit was evident for anyone watching as he did his best to keep Ivory Coast in the lead time after time.

The England coach, Gareth Southgate, was not satisfied with what he saw. Determined to change the course of the game, he brought on Marcus Rashford and Jamie Vardy, replacing Kyle Walker and Raheem Sterling. His intent was clear. He wanted to strengthen England's attacking power and get one goal back before it was too late.

The substitutes stepped onto the pitch, and England's offensive intensified. They pushed harder, searching desperately for a breakthrough. The Ivorian defense held firm, but the pressure was mounting. Eventually, in the 72nd minute, Marcus Rashford, with his lightning speed, glided past Cheick Doukouré, looking to pull the trigger from outside the box. Cheick Doukouré, hot on his heels, attempted a sliding tackle but caught Rashford instead. The referee's whistle pierced the air, awarding England a free-kick just outside the box and showing Doukouré a yellow card.

The anxiety levels around the stadium immediately skyrocketed as Marcus Rashford and Kieran Trippier stood over the ball. The English fans roared, sensing a crucial moment. Ivory Coast's players formed a wall, their faces etched with determination. Gbohouo positioned himself, his eyes locked on the ball, ready for whatever came next.

Seconds ticked by, and all of a sudden, the cheers in the stadium subsided. Kieran Trippier stepped up, his eyes focused and unwavering. He took a deep breath and then a few steps forward, striking the ball with the inside of his boot. His set-piece skills were squeaky clean, and the ball curved around the wall, heading for the top corner. Gbohouo leaped, hoping to save the day again, but his outstretched glove was nowhere near the ball. The net bulged, and the stadium erupted in cheers. England had pulled one back, making it 2-1 during the 73rd minute.

The English players didn't celebrate but rushed forward to pick the ball from the back of the net. Their actions conveyed their intent. They didn't want to waste any time. They wished to restart the game as soon as possible.

Zachary could feel the momentum shifting as he retook his position, looking to restart the game. What he had feared had happened, and England had gotten one goal back with almost 20 minutes still on the clock. He knew they were in for a fight, so he rallied his teammates. "Stay focused! We still have the lead. Defend with everything you've got, and let's look for our chances on the counter!"

His teammates acknowledged his advice as they also retook their position. Their eyes were brimming with spirit, and they would do whatever it took to maintain their lead until the final whistle.

Chapter 655 A Stunner from Over 35 Meters Out.

The game restarted at the Luzhniki Stadium with Ivory Coast holding onto the delicate 2-1 lead against England, keeping the crowd in suspense. The Ivorians, keen to protect their advantage, immediately tried to dominate possession, passing the ball around and attempting to run down the clock. But the English players, rejuvenated by their recent goal, were relentless. They swarmed the Ivorians like vampires after smelling blood, pressing high and hard, leaving no time for leisurely play.

Even the English forwards—Harry Kane, Jamie Vardy, and Marcus Rashford—joined the effort, running tirelessly to win back possession. England was going all out, and their persistence paid off when they forced the Ivorians to play a high ball towards England's territory. Harry Maguire was calm and collected as he received the long ball and controlled it perfectly. He passed it to Jordan Henderson, who in turn found Dele Alli. The game intensity suddenly shifted, and the English midfielders began to build their attack methodically, moving the ball with purpose and patience. They didn't force anything for the next few minutes. Instead, they linked up with short passes, playing the ball from touchline to touchline as they searched for opportunities to break Ivory Coast.

A momentary calm settled upon the field as one team defended while the other moved the ball around without launching deadly offensives. But as the game clock neared the 80th minute, the intensity rose again as England shifted gears. Marcus Rashford suddenly sprinted down the left wing, combining seamlessly with Ashley Young. The two exchanged quick one-twos, skillfully bypassing Serge Aurier and

cutting into the pitch. They advanced towards Ivory Coast's box like predators closing in on their prey. Eric Bailly rushed to intercept them, but the ball was played to Rashford once more. The angle was tight, but Rashford still pulled the trigger and unleashed a powerful shot, aiming for the inside of the near post.

Unfortunately for England, Sylvain Gbohouo, Ivory Coast's vigilant goalkeeper, was ready. He dived instinctively, blocking the shot with his chest. The ball rebounded off him, landing dangerously in front of the goal mouth. Jamie Vardy, the ever-consummate poacher in the box, reacted with lightning speed, sliding in to tap the ball into the net. But Serey Dié, having tracked back with determination, reached the ball first and booted it away from danger.

The ball soared through the air, evading several English players who lunged to intercept it before landing on the other side of the box. The Ivorians breathed a sigh of relief, but the respite was brief as the danger was still at large. England regrouped quickly, launching another wave of attack. Kieran Trippier picked up the loose ball and, with a quick glance up the field, sent a curling cross back into the box. The ball arced beautifully, heading straight for Harry Kane.

Kane, positioned perfectly, went into action, rising above the defenders and connecting with a powerful header. The ball rocketed towards the top corner, but Gbohouo, in an incredible display of reflexes, stretched to his full height and tipped it over the bar. The stadium erupted in a mix of groans and cheers—England's near-miss had the fans on the edge of their seats.

The resulting corner was taken quickly by Ashley Young. The ball whipped into the box, causing chaos as bodies clashed and scrambled for strategic positions in the danger zone. Fortunately for the Ivorians, Eric Bailly towered over everyone and got his head to it first to clear the immediate danger. The ball flew out towards the right touchline, where Wilfried Zaha picked it up and began to sprint down the wing, initiating a counter-attack.

The English midfielders and defenders scrambled to get back as Zaha, with blistering pace, darted past one English player, then another. The roar of the African fans reverberated as he showcased his class and surged forward like a tsunami.

Finally, as he stepped into England's half, he looked up and spotted Zachary making a run down the center. With a perfectly timed pass, Zaha fed the ball to Zachary, who controlled it expertly and charged towards the box. The Ivorian fans cheered with renewed energy, sensing another chance to extend their lead.

John Stones, England's steadfast center-back, was quick to react, though. He swiftly closed the distance, determined to stop Zachary and thwart the counter-attack. Undeterred by the approaching defender, Zachary executed two swift step-overs, momentarily confusing Stones. Seizing the moment, he accelerated, attempting to rush past the English defender.

But Stones didn't relent since allowing Zachary through could spell the end of England's World Cup hopes. His mind was already made up, and as Zachary surged forward, Stones twisted around and latched onto Zachary's shirt, pulling with all his might. Zachary felt the tug but remained focused on the goal, determined to push through. He just needed to get past Stones, and then, he would only have one more English player and the keeper to beat.

The crowd's roar reached a crescendo as Zachary tried to power forward, but Stones was relentless. He grabbed Zachary's shirt, holding on for dear life and refusing to let go. The relentless pull finally succeeded in dragging Zachary to the ground. On cue, the referee's whistle pierced the air, signaling a free-kick for Ivory Coast and a yellow card for John Stones.

Zachary picked himself up, a mix of frustration and determination in his eyes. He had been inches away from a potential game-clinching goal, only to be thwarted by a foul. The free-kick awarded was a good 35 meters from the goal. It just felt like a poor consolation. But there was no time to dwell on missed opportunities. The game was still on, and the stakes were higher than ever.

Zachary focused on the task at hand, preparing for the free-kick. As he assessed the situation, Zaha, Eric Bailly, and Nicolas Pépé approached him, eager to discuss their strategy.

"How do you want to take this?" Bailly asked, his voice steady but tense.

"It's too far out," Zachary replied, glancing at the distance between him and the goal. "Let's go with a simple chip into the box. You guys can try to go for the ball and score."

Zaha shook his head, a determined glint in his eyes. "No, Zach. You should try your luck and go directly for the goal. We can't commit too many players forward. If we miss, we'll be inviting a counter-attack from England."

Zachary considered Zaha's suggestion. It was risky and bold, but he trusted the power of his leg and the unpredictability of football. Maybe a miracle could happen. "Alright, let's do it," he agreed. "I'll go for it."

He backed away from the ball, making some distance for a more powerful run-up. As the referee finally blew the whistle, signaling the restart, Zachary took the longer-than-usual run toward the ball. He caught it square with the upper toe area of his boot, unleashing his Missile Launcher Juju.

The ball rocketed off his foot, zigzagging unpredictably through the air. Jordan Pickford, England's goalkeeper, barely had time to think or react. The ball blasted into the back of the net with a resounding thud, sending shockwaves through the stadium.

For a moment, the stadium was stunned into silence. The fans, players, and everyone else watching seemed frozen as they processed what they had just witnessed. Zachary had converted a free-kick from over 35 meters out with a long-range missile, scoring Ivory Coast's third goal during the 84th minute.

The silence was quickly shattered by the roar of the Ivorian fans. They erupted into wild celebrations, their vigorous cheers echoing through the stadium as the commentators excitedly announced the goal and Zachary's heroics.

Fueled by adrenaline and excitement, Zachary sprinted toward the sidelines to celebrate with his coaches and teammates. Zaha approached him with a wide grin, a look that said, "I told you so."

"See? I knew you could do it!" Zaha laughed, slapping Zachary on the back.

Zachary chuckled and high-fived him. "Thanks for the push, Zaha. I couldn't have thought about trying if you hadn't made the suggestion."

As he celebrated with his teammates, Zachary felt pride and determination welling up in tides within him. They were now leading 3-1, and as long as they maintained their composure and avoided mistakes, they were on their way to the World Cup finals.

Chapter 656 Onwards, To the Finals

656 Onwards, To the Finals

The game resumed after the goal celebrations, with the English players immediately trying to organize another offensive. But the goal they had just conceded seemed to have taken the wind out of their sails. Their attacks, which had been relentless and aggressive, now lacked the same intensity and sharpness.

They resorted to long balls and hopeful crosses to Harry Kane and Jamie Vardy, desperately seeking a miracle.

Ivory Coast, buoyed by their two-goal cushion, fell back into their half, defending with everything they had. It was as if their very existence depended on stopping every English advance. Bodies were thrown in the way of shots, legs were extended to intercept passes, and headers cleared dangerous crosses. The minutes dragged on, each one feeling like days in hell as England's frustration grew. But not much changed as the English players were visibly exhausted, their movements slower and less coordinated. The urgency in their play had dissipated, replaced by a sense of desperation. Pacing the sidelines with a furrowed brow, Gareth Southgate decided to make one last change, bringing on Trent Alexander-Arnold for Ashley Young. It was a final roll of the dice, but even this substitution seemed too little, too late.

As the game approached injury time, the Ivory Coast players could feel the weight of history pressing down on them. Every second brought them closer to an unprecedented achievement. England managed to muster two more attacks during the added time, but they were half-hearted, lacking the conviction that had defined their earlier play. The Ivorians held firm, blocking, clearing, and frustrating their opponents at every turn.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity of torture, the referee blew the final whistle. The sound was both a signal of victory and a release of immense tension. The English players collapsed to the ground, their faces etched with the agony of defeat. Their World Cup dreams had shattered, the realization hitting them like a physical blow.

In stark contrast, the Ivorian players erupted into jubilation. They had done it. They had made history, becoming the first African nation to qualify for the World Cup finals. The sense of accomplishment and pride was overwhelming. Tears of joy streamed down their faces as they hugged each other, their coaches, and even some fans in the stands closer to the field.

Zachary found himself amidst the ecstatic chaos, his heart pounding with a bit of disbelief and overwhelming joy. He looked around at his teammates, each a hero in their own right. They had fought tooth and nail, defied expectations, and carved their names into the annals of football history. The dream was now within reach. They had one more match to go, one more hurdle to overcome. France awaited them in the finals, but for now, they could bask in the glory of their monumental achievement.

As the players began their lap of honor, Zachary caught sight of Zaha, who grinned broadly and gave him a thumbs-up. "Told you to go for it, and that's what changed everything," Zaha shouted over the noise.

Zachary laughed, feeling a surge of camaraderie and affection for his teammate. "One more to go," he shouted back, his mind already looking forward to the next challenge. They had made history, but their World Cup journey wasn't over.

As the jubilant Ivorian players finally began heading back to the dressing room, their victory still fresh and their smiles wide, Claire Arnoux from beIN Sports approached her camera crew in tow. Coach Hervé Renard noticed her and immediately stepped forward, ready to share his thoughts on the historic match.

"Coach Renard, congratulations on this incredible victory," Claire began, her voice barely audible over the celebratory din. "How do you feel after leading Ivory Coast to their first World Cup final?"

Hervé Renard's face lit up with a genuine smile. "Thank you, Claire. It's an indescribable feeling. This victory is not just for our team - but for the entire nation of Ivory Coast... and for all of Africa. The boys played with heart and soul, and it's a testament to their hard work and dedication."

Claire nodded, her eyes sparkling with enthusiasm. "The game was intense, especially in the second half when England scored. How did you keep the team focused and maintain the lead?"

Renard took a deep breath, recalling the nail-biting moments. "England is a formidable team. We knew they would come at us with everything they had. But the key was to remain calm and composed. We emphasized solid defense and seized every counter-attack opportunity. The players executed our game plan perfectly. It was crucial for us not to only defend but also to pose a threat offensively... And that is exactly what we did."

"And speaking of offense," Claire continued, "Zachary Bemba was phenomenal today. Two stunning free-kicks! He's now leading the race for the Golden Boot with eight goals. What can you say about his performance?"

Renard's expression softened with pride as he spoke about his star player. "Zachary has been exceptional throughout this tournament. His skill, determination, and ability to stay composed under pressure are remarkable. Those two free-kicks today were a display of his incredible talent. He's not just a goal-scorer but a true leader on the pitch. His vision and execution have been crucial to our success."

Claire glanced at the statistics she had on her notepad. "With Harry Kane and Luka Modrić trailing him with six goals and Kylian Mbappé with five, Zachary is in a strong position for the Golden Boot. How significant is this achievement for him and the team?"

Renard's smile widened. "It's a huge accomplishment. Winning the Golden Boot would be a justified testament to Zachary's hard work and dedication. But he's not focused on individual accolades; his primary goal is to help the team win. That's what makes him such a valuable player. His contributions on and off the field have been instrumental in getting us to the final."

Claire's admiration was evident as she wrapped up the interview. "Thank you, Coach Renard, and best of luck in the final against France. The whole world will be watching."

Renard nodded, his eyes gleaming with determination. "Thank you, Claire. We'll give it our all."

As he turned to rejoin his celebrating team, Renard felt a surge of pride and anticipation. The journey had been long and arduous, but they were now on the brink of making history. The ultimate prize was still up for grabs, and they were ready to fight for it with everything they got.

Chapter 657 Zachary's Top Supporters

657 Zachary's Top Supporters

As Emily Anderson stepped out of the Luzhniki Stadium, her mind was a whirlwind of conflicting emotions. The bright floodlights pierced through the dark Moscow sky, but the excitement of the game was fading fast. England's loss bore heavily on her heart, leaving her national pride bruised by the defeat.

However, as Zachary's agent, there was a sense of relief and pride that she couldn't ignore. His performance was just too outstanding. Aside from propelling Ivory Coast into the World Cup final, his feats had also significantly boosted his market value and future prospects.

Beside her walked a lively entourage: Kristin, Zachary's dedicated assistant; Bjørn Peters, his ever-enthusiastic fitness trainer; Inger, his meticulous chef; Céleste Kouame, his proud biological mother; and Natasha Kone, his vibrant step-sister. The group couldn't mask their excitement, their minds still riding the high of Zachary's exceptional game. Natasha and Bjørn couldn't stop animatedly discussing the two stunning free-kicks he converted, their voices overlapping enthusiastically, while Kristin chimed in with playful comments.

As they boarded the bus back to their hotel in Sochi, the conversation flowed effortlessly, a mix of admiration for Zachary's skill and playful banter. The journey was filled with laughter and excitement, the reality of the moment enveloping them. They knew they were part of something historic.

After a quick dinner at the hotel, they dispersed to their rooms, each carrying the night's events deep in their hearts. Emily and Kristin shared a room, and as they entered, Kristin immediately switched on the television. The screen flickered to life with ITV's post-match analysis, hosted by Mark Pougatch and featuring a star-studded panel of pundits: Gary Neville, Lee Dixon, Roy Keane, Ian Wright, Ryan Giggs, and Slaven Bilic.

Emily and Kristin settled onto their beds, their attention riveted to the screen. The discussion was candid and engaging, the pundits diving straight into the heart of England's defeat.

"Harry Maguire's early error set the tone," Gary Neville lamented, his regret evident since he was an Englishman. "It was a gift to Zaha, and from there, it was an uphill battle."

Roy Keane, never one to mince words, nodded in agreement. "You just can't afford to make those mistakes at this level. It's a no-brainer! When you're up against players like Zaha and Zachary, who are so clinical and can pounce on any error, you must not lose focus, not even for a second. But credit to Ivory Coast and Zachary in particular. What an outstanding performance!"

Ian Wright leaned in, clearly thrilled. "Those free-kicks! Especially the second one—from over 35 meters out, and he just smashed it in. The last time I saw something like that was in Roberto Carlos' time. This could be the standout goal, the best goal of this World Cup campaign."

Ryan Giggs joined in with his characteristic calm demeanor. "Zachary's technique is something special. He's got the power but also the precision. That combination is lethal for any goalkeeper and defenses standing at the opposite end of his free-kicks."

The others nodded as Slaven Bilic jumped in, his voice filled with admiration. "And let's not forget his overall impact. He's not just scoring; he's creating chances and leading the team. He's been a phenomenon in every game he's played during this World Cup."

The discussion shifted to Ivory Coast's prospects in the final against France. Lee Dixon expressed cautious optimism. "France is a tough opponent, but if Zachary plays like he did today, they have a real shot. They only need a bit of luck to create history by becoming the first African nation to lift the World Cup."

Mark Pougatch steered the conversation towards individual accolades. "Zachary is now leading the Golden Boot race with eight goals. He's ahead of Harry Kane and Luka Modrić, who have six each, and Kylian Mbappé with five."

Roy Keane, always the realist, nodded thoughtfully. "If Ivory Coast wins the final and Zachary continues this form, he could as well take home the Golden Boot, the Golden Ball, and maybe even the Ballon d'Or."

Slaven Bilic chimed in with a smile. "I believe his main rival for the Golden Ball is Kylian Mbappé. However, he should be the definite frontrunner for the Ballon d'Or. I don't see anyone else coming even close, especially since Cristiano Ronaldo's Portugal, Lionel Messi's Argentina, and Modrić's Croatia have already been knocked out."

Roy Keane agreed, "I was certain he would have clinched the Ballon d'Or last season after his victories in the Champions League and the Serie A. I can't understand why they didn't award it to him. But this time, he should definitely bag it."

Emily felt a rush of pride hearing these accolades. Zachary's journey had been incredible—and now, he stood on the cusp of greatness. Kristin glanced over at her, a knowing smile on her face. "Looks like your client is the talk of the town."

Emily chuckled, her heart swelling with pride and excitement. "He's also your boss. And let's agree that he deserves all the glory. He's worked so hard for this moment."

The show continued with more analysis, but the energy in the room had shifted. As the pundits dissected every play and every decision, Emily couldn't help but feel a profound sense of anticipation for what lay ahead. The final against France loomed large, but anything seemed possible, especially with Zachary leading the charge.

The post-match show eventually wrapped up, and Emily turned to the travel suitcase resting against the wall. She pushed the day's excitement to the back of her mind as the practicalities of her job demanded attention. She unzipped the suitcase and pulled out five neatly organized files—each representing a leading Premier League team eager to sign Zachary. With the World Cup nearing its end, she knew it was time to start analyzing these offers to secure the best possible future for her star client.

The first file she opened was from Manchester City. They were keen to bring in a new midfielder following the departure of Yaya Toure. Emily read their initial offer, noting the impressive signing bonus and substantial weekly wages. However, she doubted Zachary would choose Manchester City. The team was already stacked with talent, and joining them wouldn't pose much of a challenge for a player of his caliber.

She moved on to the other files: Liverpool, Arsenal, Manchester United, Chelsea, and Tottenham. All the clubs had shown clear interest, offering enticing financial packages and the 'promise' of being a central figure in their squads. As a free agent, Zachary had the luxury of choosing his next destination without any transfer fees, making him even more attractive to these top clubs.

Kristin, who had remained quiet while observing from the side, broke the silence. "So, which club do you think Zachary will join after the World Cup?"

Emily smiled, taking a moment to consider. "It's hard to say for sure, but I think he'll probably join either Arsenal or Liverpool. Both clubs have shown a lot of interest. They also offer the challenge and prestige he seeks to advance his career."

Kristin nodded thoughtfully. "Arsenal or Liverpool... Both would be exciting. But it means we'll all have to shift from Turin to England when Zachary changes clubs."

Emily chuckled softly. "That's the life of anyone working in football. Except for a few cases, we always move from one country to another. It's part of the journey."

They fell into a comfortable silence, each lost in their thoughts. Emily continued reviewing the files while Kristin pondered the inevitable changes ahead. The transition from Italy to England would be significant, but it was a testament to Zachary's rising star and the opportunities that awaited him.

"Do you think he'll adjust well to the Premier League?" Kristin asked, breaking the silence again.

Emily looked up, her eyes sparkling with confidence. "Zachary has the talent and the determination to succeed anywhere. The Premier League will be a new challenge, but I have no doubt he'll thrive. Just look at what he has achieved during this World Cup campaign. Does he look like a player who will fail to adapt to another league?"

Kristin smiled, reassured by Emily's confidence. "I'm sure you're right. It's just that everything is happening so fast."

Emily nodded. "It is, but that's the nature of the sport. One moment, you're celebrating a victory... And the next, you're planning for the future. It's all part of the adventure."

They chatted a bit more, discussing the logistics of moving, the excitement of the potential new clubs, and the incredible journey they had all been on with Zachary. Their bond had grown strong, forged through the highs and lows of professional football.

Eventually, the conversation wound down. Kristin switched off the television, and they headed to the bathroom to shower and get ready for bed. Minutes later, as Emily finally lay in bed, her mind still whirring with thoughts of transfer negotiations and future prospects, she couldn't help but feel a surge of pride. Zachary's journey was far from over, and she was honored to be part of it.

Kristin's soft voice broke the quiet. "Do you think he'll win the Ballon d'Or?"

Emily smiled in the darkness. "If he keeps playing like this, I believe he will. The sky's the limit for Zachary."

With that, they both drifted off to sleep, dreaming of what the future held for their extraordinary client and the adventures that awaited them all in the dynamic football world.

Chapter 658 The Final Countdown

658 The Final Countdown

Four days had slipped by like grains of sand through an hourglass, and now, it was finally Sunday, July 15th—the day of the World Cup final. The Ivory Coast players, who had trained and prepared arduously,

were now in a pristine state of controlled anticipation. The day had finally arrived, and the tension in the air was noticeable all around them.

Zachary spent the morning in his hotel room, lost in the pages of a novel. The story helped to calm his nerves and distract him from the looming final. Occasionally, he paused to sip water, ensuring he remained well-hydrated. He also had his meals on time, knowing the importance of maintaining his physical readiness for the high-intensity game ahead. Periodically, he would chat with teammates like Zaha and Eric Bailly, sharing light-hearted jokes to shake off the anxiety.

After lunch, the atmosphere began to change. The casual ease of the morning gave way to a more solemn and focused energy. The final was scheduled for 6:00 PM, and the players knew that every minute counted. They began their final mental preparation, pondering their strategies and visualizing their roles on the pitch.

At 3:00 PM, Hervé Renard, the Ivorian coach, summoned the team to the conference room for their final pre-match tactics session. The room was filled with quiet determination as the players took their seats, their faces a mixture of nerves and steely resolve.

Renard greeted his players with a calm, reassuring smile. "We've already gone over these tactics in our previous training sessions, but I want to reiterate our plan for clarity," he began. "We'll stick to our 4-2-3-1 formation. However, this time around, we'll play narrow, especially when we don't have the ball. Our main goal is to close down the half-spaces and cut off the possible passing lanes, thus preventing France from easily penetrating through the middle."

He elaborated more on the formation, emphasizing a few more crucial points for a few minutes before eventually turning to the defenders. "Wilfried Kanon, you're back in the starting eleven after overcoming your injury. You'll need to be on your toes marking Kylian Mbappé."

"Mbappé is fast and unpredictable, but you have the skill to handle him. Just be brave, believe in yourself, and stick to the basics. Don't feel too much pressure, and remember that even if he breaks past you, there'll be our defensive midfielders to help you out. Eric Bailly, Lamine Koné, and Serge Aurier, you'll need to watch the other French forwards. Communication and coordination will be key."

Renard's eyes scanned the room, locking on each player, ensuring they felt the weight of their roles. "Serey Dié and Franck Kessié, you are our two defensive midfielders, our double pivots. You must remain vigilant, cutting off passing lanes and supporting our central defense. If our wing-backs are in trouble, you must also try to cover them and prevent Mbappé and Blaise Matuidi from cutting inside."

"Zachary," he said, turning to his star player, "you, Zaha, Pépé, and Kalou must give it your all. Zaha, you'll be our center-forward, while Zachary, you'll play your natural midfield position. Use your vision and creativity to open up opportunities... And if there's a chance, seize it. Remember that we'll get only a few chances in this final, so you must be razor-sharp and clinical whenever we go forward."

"Pépé and Kalou, you'll be on the flanks. But don't spread out too wide as we want to keep it narrow. Drop back when we're defending and cover the half-spaces to ensure their wingers don't drift inside. You also need to support the wing-backs."

The room was silent, the gravity of the moment sinking in. Zachary felt a surge of determination. He glanced at Zaha, Pépé, and Kalou, who gave him confident nods. They knew what was at stake and were ready to leave everything on the pitch.

Renard finished with a few more encouraging remarks, "We've come this far, and now we stand on the brink of history. We are the first African team to reach the World Cup final. Let's go out there and play with the heart and passion that has brought us this far. Give it everything you have... And no matter what happens, know you have made your country proud."

The players rose, a collective sense of purpose uniting them. They filed out of the conference room and returned to their rooms to change into their tracksuits. The final preparations were made in silence, each player lost in their thoughts, visualizing their roles and the upcoming battle on the pitch.

In his room, Zachary donned his tracksuit, the weight of the Ivorian crest on his chest a reminder of the hopes and dreams of millions resting on their shoulders. He closed his eyes briefly, taking a deep breath, centering himself.

As he reopened his eyes, a fierce determination shone in his gaze. He was ready to give his all and lead his team to World Cup glory. The thought of helping Ivory Coast overcome France in the finals fueled his determination, and he was prepared to do whatever it took to achieve victory.

Meanwhile, the French camp was also buzzing with anticipation. The final tactics meeting was underway in the grand conference room of their hotel, and Didier Deschamps, the French coach, stood at the

front, his presence commanding attention. The players were seated and listening intently, their faces reflecting a mix of nerves and determination. The World Cup final was just hours away, and every word from their coach was critical.

Deschamps began by reiterating their formation—a tried-and-tested 4-2-3-1. The plan was simple yet effective, designed to maximize their strengths and exploit any weaknesses in the Ivorian side. He spoke with clarity and purpose, his voice steady and confident.

08:09

As he wrapped up the overview of their tactics, he turned to N'Golo Kanté, the team's most hard-working and industrious defensive midfielder. Kanté's role was pivotal. He was to shadow and neutralize Zachary Bemba, the Ivory Coast's dynamic playmaker and midfield engine. Deschamps fixed his gaze on Kanté, his eyes intense.

"N'Golo, your role is crucial. You must mark and neutralize Zachary Bemba's threat. Can you handle that?"

Kanté, usually reserved, nodded and replied, "I'll try my best, coach."

Deschamps wasn't satisfied. He shook his head and leaned in closer, speaking in a way that left no room for arguments. "I need more than that, N'Golo. I need certainty. Can you stop him?"

Kanté's eyes narrowed as he considered the challenge. After a moment, he straightened up, patted his chest, and said with unwavering resolve, "I'll stop Zachary at all costs."

Deschamps nodded, finally satisfied. He turned his attention to Paul Pogba. "Paul, you'll need to cover for N'Golo when he's out of position. That aside, keep things tidy in the midfield. Push forward when there's a chance and drop back to support the defense when they're under pressure. Remember, we must dominate the game."

"Sure, coach." Pogba nodded, his expression serious. Deschamps then shifted focus to the attacking players. "Kylian," he said, addressing Mbappé, "play your game, just like you always do. Use your speed and creativity to break them down. Give them hell, and try your luck on the goal whenever you see fit."

Mbappé gave a confident nod, a small smile playing on his lips. He was ready to electrify the pitch with his pace and flair.

Deschamps continued, "Antoine, Blaise, Olivier—you also must be sharp upfront. Play and move like we have practiced during our training sessions over the past few days. We need to get a goal, maybe two, as quickly as possible. We have to kill off their hopes early."

Griezmann, Matuidi, and Giroud listened intently, their faces set in steely determination. They knew the weight of their roles and the importance of delivering when it mattered most.

Deschamps then emphasized a few more crucial points of their game plan, his voice resonating with authority. "Remember, we are the better team. We have come this far because of our skills and determination, not just by luck. So, while you're on the pitch, remain confident. Keep things simple, and enjoy your football. Dominate them with your skill and teamwork."

He paused, letting his words sink in, before delivering his final remark. "Let's win the World Cup."

The players responded with a resounding roar, their spirited voices echoing around the conference room. Their readiness for battle was evident in the auras they exuded.

Deschamps smiled and finally dismissed the players. They rose from their seats and left the conference room as Deschamps watched them go, knowing he had done everything he could to prepare them. The rest was up to them.

As the French players returned to their rooms to get ready, the sense of anticipation grew. The corridors of the hotel were filled with tense energy, the echoes of footsteps a reminder of the impending clash.

The final was hours away, but the battle lines had already been drawn. On one side, Ivory Coast, a team driven by a dream and a few players of extraordinary talent, was the underdog. On the other, France, a squad brimming with skill, experience, and unyielding determination, wished more than anything to win the game and lift the World Cup trophy.

Chapter 659 The Battle Begins

659 The Battle Begins

At 4:45 PM, the Ivorian players, dressed in their team tracksuits, eagerly hopped onto the bus bound for the Luzhniki Stadium. Excitement crackled in the air, and you could feel the anticipation building with every passing moment.

As they exited their hotel premises, they were greeted by a large gathering of fans and journalists lining the streets. The crowd's energy was electric, a bluster of cheers and waving flags creating a vibrant send-off for the team.

From his seat on the bus, Zachary Bemba looked out of the window—at the sea of faces. He saw many African fans, their numbers more than ever, and their expressions filled with hope and pride. It once again stirred something deep within him. The sight reminded him of the responsibility they bore. They weren't just playing for themselves or their team; they were playing for an entire continent. But that responsibility came with immense pressure.

Zachary knew that if they lost the final, all the glory they had achieved would be overshadowed by the disappointment of falling at the last hurdle. They would become a footnote in the story of the World Cup winners, a cautionary tale of what could have been.

To block out the growing anxiety, Zachary put on his headphones and switched on his music. The familiar beat of "Hall of Fame" by The Script and will.i.am filled his ears, the motivational lyrics resonating deeply. He subconsciously started humming along, his fingers tapping away the rhythm on his knee. Slowly, the anxiety began to ebb away, replaced by a surge of determination.

He noticed his teammates turning to look at him, curiosity piqued by the music he was humming. Those who understood English quickly joined in, singing along to the chorus, while the others clapped their hands and banged the seats in time with the beat. The atmosphere in the bus then slowly transformed from tense to jubilant. Wilfried Zaha and Eric Bailly, ever the entertainers, took the lead, their voices rising above the din, turning the bus into a moving choir. Even some bold members of the coaching staff joined in, clapping and singing, their earlier seriousness melting away in the shared moment of camaraderie.

When they finally arrived at the Luzhniki Stadium, the tension had been replaced with laughter and jokes. The power of music had worked its miracle, easing their nerves and lifting their spirits. As they disembarked, they were greeted by another sea of fans, the noise almost deafening. They could hear their names being shouted by the crowd, the resulting excitement a tangible force that threatened to sweep them off their feet. Zachary could see the pride and hope in the eyes of the fans, a reflection of what they were playing for.

The players waved to the fans before quickly disappearing into the stadium. After arriving in their dressing room, they changed into warm-up jerseys and headed to the pitch. They found the stadium a cauldron of noise, packed with over 70,000 supporters of different origins, colors, and cultures, hoping to witness the clash between Ivory Coast and France. Under the urging of Coach Hervé Renard, the players ignored the crowd and focused on their warm-up routine. The familiar exercises grounded them, providing a semblance of normalcy amid the chaos.

Three minutes into their routine, the French team stepped onto the pitch, greeted by a roar of approval from their supporters. But Zachary and his teammates remained focused, their eyes fixed on their task. They completed their warm-up within 20 minutes and returned to the dressing room, where they went through their final preparations. Hydrating, visiting the washroom, and even a pre-match prayer—all were done with an air of calm determination.

As Zachary pulled on his orange number ten jersey and laced up his Nike Mercurial Roc boots, he felt the familiar pre-match pressure returning. But he welcomed it, knowing that 'the little pressure' could sharpen his performance. At that moment, Coach Hervé Renard clapped his hands to draw everyone's attention.

"Alright, listen up!" Renard's voice cut through the murmur of the room, and the players turned to face him, their expressions solemn. "This is it. The moment we've been working towards. The moment you've dreamed of since you first kicked a ball. We've prepared... we've trained, and now it's time to give it everything we've got."

He paused, letting his words sink in, his gaze moving from player to player. "We're up against a strong team. France has the talent and the experience. But so do we. Remember our tactics—stick to the 4-2-3-1, play narrow, and deny them space. Wilfried Kanon, you'll need to be sharp while marking Mbappé. Eric, Lamine, and Aurier keep an eye on the rest of their forwards. And everyone, stay disciplined."

He turned to Zachary and Zaha. "You two are our key. Zachary, control the midfield like you always do. Zaha, we need your speed and creativity up front. Give it your all. No regrets."

The coach's words were met with nods and murmurs of agreement. The tension in the room was unmistakable. But it was a focused tension, the kind that precedes greatness.

Renard took a deep breath and continued, "I know I have said these words many times, but I'll repeat them today. This is our chance to make history. To become legends. Remember why you're here. Remember who you're playing for. Now, let's go out there and win the World Cup!"

The Ivorian players erupted with a zealous roar, their hearts ablaze with determination. They strode out of the locker room, their thoughts solely focused on the upcoming battle on the field.

With each step through the tunnel, the distant thunder of the crowd grew louder, echoing in their ears like a powerful symphony.

As they advanced, they came face to face with the formidable French squad, their deep blue jerseys a striking contrast in the dim light. Among them were Raphaël Varane, Paul Pogba, N'Golo Kanté, Kylian Mbappé, Antoine Griezmann, and Olivier Giroud, with steely gazes that reflected unwavering resolve.

Zachary spotted Blaise Matuidi, a teammate from his past year at Juventus. They exchanged a brief nod, a silent acknowledgment of respect and friendship, and just as quickly, Zachary refocused back on the task ahead. There was no room for distraction now. This was the pinnacle of their journey.

The anticipation built as the teams eventually lined up at the tunnel's exit. The air was thick with expectation, every second stretching into an eternity. Finally, the referees, ball in hand, led the teams out onto the field. The stadium exploded into noise—a clamor of cheers, vuvuzelas, and whistles that all blended into a chaotic symphony of excitement. The ground seemed to tremble under the sheer weight of the collective energy.

The national anthems began, each note sung with pride and vigor. Zachary felt a surge of emotion as "L'Abidjanaise" filled the air, his heart beating in time with the rhythm. The pre-match handshakes followed each player exchanging formal gestures, masking the fierce competitiveness that simmered beneath the surface.

The captains met in the center for the coin toss. With Gervinho injured, Sylvain Gbohouo stepped up, assuming the role of leader. The coin spun in the air, catching the light before landing. The decision was made, and the captains returned to their teams. Sylvain called the Ivorians into a huddle, his voice steady and commanding.

"Our motto today is unending focus and sharpness," he urged, his eyes sweeping across each face. "Play like warriors and destroy the opponents. We've come too far to falter now."

A collective roar of agreement rose from the group, voicing a primal sound that ignited Zachary's anticipation even more. They then broke the huddle, moving to their positions on the pitch. The clock was nearing 6:00 PM. The referee checked his watch, glanced at the keepers, and then, with a sharp blow of the whistle, the World Cup final commenced.

France started the proceedings with Olivier Giroud nudging the ball back into midfield. Paul Pogba, with his characteristic grace, controlled the ball before passing it to Samuel Umtiti, who quickly relayed it to Raphaël Varane. The French began their methodical build-up, passing the ball back and forth, establishing their rhythm.

The Ivorians, disciplined and focused, adhered to their game plan. They maintained tight lines, resisting the urge to press high. Instead, they focused on stability, hoping to bar the French players from easily breaking their defensive set-up early in the game. As the two teams settled into their respective rhythms, the game quickly became a tactical dance, with France probing and Ivory Coast absorbing, each side testing the other's resolve.

Zachary held his position, eyes scanning the field, mind working through every possible scenario. He communicated with his teammates, signaling them to stay composed and hold their ground. This was the calm before the storm, a necessary phase to weather the initial onslaught from France.

Then, as the clock ticked past the fifteen-minute mark, the Ivorians began to grow into the match. They started to push forward, occasionally launching calculated high presses. Wilfried Zaha, Nicolas Pépé, and Salomon Kalou, swift and cunning, led the charges, applying pressure on the French midfielders and defenders. Zachary always followed, trying to utilize his incredible game reading and spatial awareness to anticipate the opponents' passes. All the other Ivorian players also started making occasional strategic runs, hoping to dispossess France.

Finally, their hard work paid off, and an opportunity arose when Zachary intercepted a loose pass from Pogba. He calmly collected the ball and sidestepped past Antoine Griezmann, looking to break through the middle. But just as he began to get into a profound dribbling rhythm, a short man seemingly appeared out of the blue, sliding forward and sweeping Zachary off his feet. It was N'Golo Kanté who had taken action.

Chapter 660 The Turning Point

660 The Turning Point

Zachary lay on the grass, wincing as he massaged his shin where N'Golo Kanté's boot had caught him. The pain was sharp but manageable. It was more a result of the impact than any significant injury. As he sat up, Wilfried Zaha, Eric Bailly, and Franck Kessié were already by his side, their faces etched with worry.

"Are you alright?" Zaha asked, extending a hand to help him up.

Zachary smiled reassuringly. "I'll be fine," he said, grasping Zaha's hand and quickly rising to stand back on his feet.

"Watch out for Kanté," Zaha warned. "He's out to get you."

Zachary chuckled. "I will," he replied, turning his attention to the rest of the field. He immediately saw Salomon Kalou and Serey Dié arguing with the referee, their gestures animated.

"Calm down, guys," Zachary called out as he hurried over to them. "Don't play into their hands. Focus on our game."

The two players nodded, eventually heeding his advice, and returned to their positions. Seconds later, the referee gave N'Golo Kanté a stern verbal warning before blowing his whistle to restart the game.

Zachary quickly took the free-kick, passing it short to Franck Kessié. But as soon as Kessié received the ball, Antoine Griezmann was upon him, forcing a quick pass back to Eric Bailly.

Bailly was also under pressure from Olivier Giroud, so he wasted no time before passing the ball to Sylvain Gbohouo, the Ivorian goalkeeper. Gbohouo scanned the field and saw Kylian Mbappé sprinting towards him. Deciding not to take any risks, he launched the ball high and far downfield.

Wilfried Zaha positioned himself near the edge of the final third, ready to contest the aerial ball with the French center-backs - Samuel Umtiti and Raphaël Varane. Using his body effectively, Zaha held them off and expertly chested the ball down, playing it back into the midfield, where Zachary was charging forward.

But Zachary wasn't alone. N'Golo Kanté was right on his heels, sticking to him like a shadow. Zachary, though, grinned, knowing his superior SSS grade agility could leave Kanté behind. He accelerated, pulling away—but then felt a tug on his shirt. Kanté had grabbed him, pulling him back.

Incensed, Zachary stopped and turned to face Kanté, who quickly apologized. "It was instinct," Kanté said hurriedly. "I didn't mean to."

Zachary couldn't help but find the situation ironic. Twice now, Kanté had fouled him and claimed it was unintentional. The referee intervened, stepping between them and showing a yellow card to Kanté.

The French players and fans groaned in frustration. A yellow card this early in the 20th minute meant Kanté would have to play cautiously for the rest of the match.

Zachary took a deep breath, pleased with the decision. He positioned himself for the free-kick, the stadium watching with bated breath. He knew this was a critical moment. It was only 20 minutes into the game, but the intensity had already reached unprecedented levels.

The referee's whistle cut through the noise, signaling the restart. Zachary glanced at the French wall comprised only of two players, then at his teammates, before focusing on the ball.

He struck it with practiced skill, sending it curling into the box. The French defense scrambled, clearing the ball, but it fell to Franck Kessié at the edge of the area. Kessié took a touch and fired a shot, but it was blocked by Varane.

The ball ricocheted back towards Zachary, who controlled it with an almost effortless deft touch. He looked up, spotting Zaha making a run into the box.

His instincts churned, and without hesitating, Zachary flicked the ball over the defense, and Zaha met it with a powerful header. Unfortunately, the French goalkeeper, Hugo Lloris, made a spectacular save, tipping the ball over the bar.

The crowd roared in appreciation of the thrilling sequence. The Ivorians were undeterred, lining up for the corner kick with renewed determination. Zachary also jogged into the box, his mind clear, his focus

sharp. He knew they had the momentum. The game was still young, and they had to capitalize on every opportunity.

The referee's whistle soon pierced the air, signaling Nicolas Pépé to take the corner kick. Positioned before the corner spot, Pépé delivered a beautifully curling ball into the box.

Zachary timed his run perfectly, using his 6'4 frame to tower over the French defenders. His eyes were locked on the fast-approaching ball, ready to guide it into the net with a powerful header.

But then, another figure entered his line of vision—Samuel Umtiti, rising to meet him in an aerial duel. Zachary didn't back down, angling his head to win the battle. The ball sped towards them, and just as Zachary prepared to connect, he saw the ball hit Umtiti's slightly raised arm.

Umtiti flinched but quickly pretended nothing had happened, deflecting the ball away. Paul Pogba seized the opportunity, booting the ball clear of the box.

Zachary and his teammates erupted, yelling at the referee for a penalty, waving their arms frantically. But the referee waved off their pleas, motioning for the play to continue.

In the meantime, Antoine Griezmann swiftly collected the cleared ball, turning and passing to Kylian Mbappé, who was already sprinting down the right wing, ready to launch a counterattack.

Just then, another twist happened. The referee blew his whistle again and pointed to his ear, signaling a VAR check. The stadium's jumbotron flashed "Checking Possible Penalty" and "Handball," sending shockwaves through the pitch. Mbappé, frustrated, halted his run while an anxious atmosphere settled over the crowd.

The French players surrounded the referee, arguing their case, but he waved them off and soon jogged to the pitch-side monitor. He reviewed the replay of Umtiti's handball, clearly seeing the ball strike the defender's hand. The crucial questions now were whether Umtiti's hand was in a natural position and if the handball was intentional or denied a goal-scoring opportunity.

The referee made his decision and ran back to the pitch, pointing to the penalty spot and awarding Ivory Coast a penalty. He also showed Umtiti a yellow card, much to the relief and joy of the Ivorian fans and

players. The French fans, however, erupted in outrage, cursing the intrusion of VAR into the beautiful game of football.

But all that had nothing to do with Zachary. He stepped forward, his heart pounding with the weight of the moment.

It was the 23rd minute, and he had the chance to put Ivory Coast ahead. The stadium fell into a tense silence as he placed the ball on the spot. He took a deep breath, blocking out the noise and pressure, focusing solely on the goal before him.

Hugo Lloris, the French goalkeeper, stood poised, his eyes locked on Zachary. Zachary took a few steps back, visualizing the shot. The referee blew the whistle, and in that instant, time seemed to slow down. Zachary surged forward, striking the ball with composure and practiced skill.

Everything that followed happened so fast, and the ball sailed through the air, curving away from Lloris's outstretched arms and burying itself in the back of the net.

The stadium erupted into thunderous cheers and groans, a symphony of contrasting emotions. Zachary sprinted towards the corner flag, his teammates piling onto him in celebration. Ivory Coast was ahead, 1-0, and the dream of lifting the World Cup grew closer.