

Greatest 661

Chapter 661 A Glimpse of Glory

Kristin was in the heart of the Luzhniki Stadium, lost in a sea of ecstatic fans. Beside her were Emily and Zachary's closest supporters. The energy was electric, the air thick with excitement after Zachary converted the penalty in the 23rd minute. She jumped and yelled like a little girl, hugging Emily tightly. "Zachary's done it again!" she shouted, her voice lost in the thunderous roar around her.

Vuvuzelas, cheers, and African drums filled the stands, creating a thrilling concerto of celebration. The floor beneath them seemed to shake under the weight of the exuberant fans. As the initial frenzy began to calm, Kristin heard the commentator's voice cut through the noise.

"Zachary has done it again! This time from the penalty spot, putting Ivory Coast in the driving seat in the 23rd minute. That's his ninth goal of this World Cup tournament, inching him closer to the Golden Boot. Unless Kylian Mbappé can score four more, Zachary is on his way to claiming the title."

The other commentator chuckled, and Kristin shook her head, sharing a knowing glance with Emily. They were on the brink of witnessing history, and Zachary was leading the charge. Kristin and Emily turned their focus back to the pitch, where the game was restarting.

The French players had regrouped. Their faces were etched with frustration, but determination blazed in their eyes. They needed to respond quickly.

The urgency in their play was palpable as they moved the ball around with skillful accuracy. It eventually found its way to Kylian Mbappé, their star forward, who seemed like a man possessed.

In a flash, Mbappé burst past Wilfried Kanon, Ivory Coast's left-back, cutting into the pitch from the wing with blistering speed. Eric Bailly and Serey Dié rushed to intercept him, but Mbappé had anticipated their move. He squared the ball to Antoine Griezmann at the edge of the box.

Griezmann, unmarked, took a single touch before unleashing a rocket of a shot towards the goal.

The tension in the stadium spiked to unbelievable levels as the ball zoomed towards the net. Sylvain Gbohouo, Ivory Coast's goalkeeper, was beaten. But then, the ball smashed off the post and rebounded towards the left side of the box. Mbappé was there, ready to pounce and take another shot.

Out of nowhere, Lamine Koné slid in like a python through the grass, throwing his body in the way. He blocked Mbappé's shot, sending the ball out of play. On cue, the referee whistled and awarded France a corner kick.

Zachary's heart pounded as he raced back towards the box to defend against the corner kick. The post had saved them this time, but he knew they couldn't rely on luck.

"Let's focus!" Zachary yelled, rallying his teammates. "Mark every Frenchman tightly. We can't let them score!"

The Ivorian players, galvanized by Zachary's call, positioned themselves to defend the corner. The French fans were roaring, urging their team forward, while the Ivorian supporters beat their drums in defiance.

Antoine Griezmann moved into position, ready to take the corner kick. The tension mounted as he sent a well-placed curling ball into the box. Zachary, using his height and strength, positioned himself to clear it. The ball came in fast, and he leaped, connecting with a powerful header that sent it out of the danger zone.

The ball fell to Franck Kessié, who controlled it expertly before launching a counterattack. The Ivorian fans erupted in cheers, sensing an opportunity. Kessié sprinted up the field, passing to Wilfried Zaha, who was making a run on the right wing.

Zaha cut inside, dancing past a defender, and unleashed a shot that was narrowly saved by Hugo Lloris. The ball went out for another corner, and the Ivorian fans roared with approval, cheering their team's boldness.

Kristin could hardly contain her excitement. The following minutes were a whirlwind of emotions, each moment more intense than the last. Ivory Coast was fighting tooth and nail, defending and launching occasional counterattacks, and Zachary was at the heart of it all. She clutched Emily's hand, her knuckles white, as she watched the drama unfold on the pitch.

The game continued at a breakneck pace, with both teams trading blows. Ivory Coast defended with grit, while France attacked with relentless pressure. The minutes ticked by, each one bringing them

closer to half-time. But the Ivorian defense, led by Eric Bailly, still held firm, repelling wave after wave of French attacks.

As the half-time whistle finally blew, Kristin released a breath she didn't realize she'd been holding. The score remained 1-0, Ivory Coast holding onto their slim lead. She tried to calm her still-racing heart as the players jogged off the pitch, sweat-soaked and determined.

Zachary and Ivory Coast were halfway there, but the battle was far from over. Kristin knew the second half would be even more challenging, but she believed in Zachary and the team.

The atmosphere in France's dressing room at half-time was solemn. The team trailed 1-0 to Ivory Coast in the World Cup finals, a scenario Didier Deschamps found unacceptable.

His voice echoed off the walls, sharp and urgent, as he demanded focus and heart from his players. His eyes blazed with intensity as he addressed them.

"Listen up, everyone," he said, his voice steady, but the intensity remained. "We're behind, but we still have forty-five minutes to change everything. A one-goal difference doesn't mean we're out of the game, so we don't need to rush or force anything. Let's remain patient in our play. Let's stick to the game plan during the second half."

Deschamps walked among his players, his presence commanding their full attention. "But we also need to be sharp while going forward. We need to get the ball to Kylian and Blaise as frequently as possible and let them advance our attacks. They can cut inside or send crosses from the wings. Olivier, you and the others must be ready to connect with those crosses and put them in the back of the net."

His words were measured, each carefully chosen to ignite the fighting spirit within his team.

"Remember, we've been here before. We know how to handle pressure, and we know how to come back from a one-goal deficit. So, go out there and play smart, play hard, and let's create opportunities. This is our moment to attain World Cup glory. Don't let it slip away."

Deschamps concluded with a few encouraging remarks, his tone softening but no less powerful. "Believe in yourselves. Believe in your teammates' skills and dedication. We can do this. We can win the World Cup!" With that, he sent his players back to the pitch for the second half, their resolve visibly strengthened.

Meanwhile, in the Ivory Coast dressing room, the mood was one brimming with quiet determination. They led 1-0, but Coach Hervé Renard knew they couldn't afford to relax. His voice was calm but firm as he addressed his players, the moment's gravity clear in his tone.

"We've done well so far and gotten the first goal, but the job is only half-done," Renard said, his eyes meeting each player's. "The second half will even be more challenging as France will come at us with even more ferocious waves of attacks. But fear not, as we can still come out on top as long as we play our hearts out there on the field. Let's stay focused, and keep everything simple! If you have the ball, pass to a free teammate. If that's not possible, clear it out. Let's avoid mistakes."

Renard stood in the center of the room, his gaze intense and reassuring. "Let's stick to the game plan. Let's continue playing narrow and deny France any chance of breaking through the middle. Let's defend well, but let's not hesitate to counterattack when we see an opportunity. We've practiced this. We know what to do."

His voice carried a calm authority that instilled confidence in his players. "This is our chance to make history, to win the World Cup for Ivory Coast and the whole African continent. We only have 45 minutes to go, but we must stay disciplined and not lose focus for even a second. We must stay strong. Remember, we're in control, and we can see this through."

"Zachary," the coach addressed his star midfielder, "You need to be cautious when you have the ball because the French midfielders are targeting you. But you also need to be bold. Whenever you spot an opening, go for it and start an attack with your dribbling. Remember, we have the VAR now, so any foul against you will not go unnoticed by the referees. Play your game and make life difficult for the French. Try to draw fouls and make them accumulate more yellow cards. This will make them play more carefully, giving us the advantage later in the game."

Renard then turned to his other players, his voice imbued with quiet strength. "Believe in each other when out there on the field. Believe in yourselves and fight for every ball. Do not give them an inch, play

like champions, and leave no room for regrets. We can win the World Cup." With those words, he sent his players back to the pitch, their spirits bolstered for the battle ahead.

Chapter 662 The Daring Solo Dash and the Roars of Abidjan

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The second half of the World Cup final between Ivory Coast and France commenced with the referee's whistle piercing the tense atmosphere of the Luzhniki Stadium in Moscow.

The Ivorians had the kick-off this time, and Wilfried Zaha, the center forward, stepped up to restart the gameplay. Positioned at the center spot, he booted the ball back into the Ivorian midfield, finding Franck Kessié with a precise pass.

Kessié was swift, knowing the French players were already charging forward. He took a single touch before passing to Zachary.

As Zachary prepared to receive the ball, he noted Olivier Giroud closing down on him. But panic was not in Zachary's nature. He swiftly brought the ball under control with his left foot and nudged it forward, just a step ahead, baiting Giroud to go for it.

When the ball was just outside Giroud's reach, Zachary suddenly stopped it with his foot, his SS+ dribbling skills, balance, and coordination working wonders. With a graceful rotation, he completed a stunning Marseille turn, leaving Giroud behind and eliciting cheers and gasps from the crowd.

The second half had just begun, but Zachary was eager to exploit every opportunity against the French defense. He revved forward, leaving the disoriented Giroud behind.

His acceleration was reminiscent of a Dodge Challenger—and within seconds, he was at his top speed, gliding past Antoine Griezmann with a simple side-step and heading toward French territory, his silhouette a flash of orange cutting through the middle.

He remained alert, and as he crossed the center line, he caught a flash of movement to his left. With his incredible dynamic visual acuity, he identified the fast-approaching N'Golo Kanté, who seemed to be preparing to sweep him with a sliding tackle.

Zachary's instincts kicked in. He slowed down, dug his boot under the ball, and leaped up just as Kanté's tackle flashed past where he had been an instant before. Zachary landed back on the green, the ball seemingly glued to his foot, eliciting more gasps of admiration from the spectators.

In his peripheral vision, Zachary saw Pogba rushing in from the right, attempting to close him down. But Zachary gave the French midfielder no chance, accelerating again and pulling away, his strides a blur like the rims of a speeding motorcycle.

Everything around him faded into the background, and before he knew it, he was stepping into the final third, facing off against the French center-backs - Varane and Umtiti. They held their positions, wary of Zachary's potent dribbling.

But Zachary had other plans. He spotted Zaha making a run on his left. Without hesitation and with eyes fixed on the center-backs, he unleashed a no-look pass reminiscent of peak-Ronaldinho style.

The ball gracefully found the sprinting Zaha. With elegance and agility, Zachary circumvented the center-backs, whose attention was momentarily diverted by Zaha. He raced past them just in time to receive a perfectly timed return ball from Zaha.

Controlling the ball mid-stride, Zachary found himself with only Hugo Lloris, the French keeper, to beat. Adrenaline pumped through his body as he focused solely on the goal, the crowd's roar fading into the background.

He saw Lloris rushing out to meet him but remained steadfast. With a well-timed move, he rounded the keeper, leaving Lloris grasping at thin air. The goal was now gaping, and Zachary smashed the ball into the back of the net, scoring Ivory Coast's second goal in the 46th minute.

A stunned silence fell over part of the crowd. The players and bench were momentarily speechless, and even the commentators paused. But the Ivorian fans didn't care. The score read 2-0 in favor of their team, the Elephants, and they couldn't help but erupt in wild celebration, yelling like mad.

Zachary had made another of his signature runs through the middle, breaking down France almost single-handedly before finding the back of the net and doubling Ivory Coast's lead. This was his tenth goal of the World Cup campaign, and he rushed toward the bench to celebrate with his coaches, substitutes, and teammates.

The second half had barely begun, yet Zachary had already delivered a decisive blow that could crush France's hopes for a comeback.

Meanwhile, far away in Abidjan, Ivory Coast's capital... the atmosphere could only be described as explosive. As Zachary's goal hit the back of the net in the 46th minute, a long-drawn-out eruption of noise swept across the city like a powerful bomb.

The Ivorian fans celebrated the goal with a collective intensity that seemed to make the whole city beat as one. Whether in homes, taxis, buses, or pubs, everyone was yelling, their voices united in a chorus of euphoria as they sensed World Cup glory inching closer.

In one bustling pub, Kwame Bamba, Adeoluwa Soro, and Yannick Goué, the three university students in their final year, were among the sea of fans. They yelled and celebrated like there was no tomorrow, matching the intensity of everyone around them. The bar reverberated with vigor—like a living organism pulsating with hope and excitement.

Then, the replay of Zachary's stunning solo run appeared on the large screen. The pub fell silent as all eyes were fixated on the display. They watched in awe as Zachary dribbled past one French player after another, his grace a blend of Zidane's elegance and Ronaldinho's flamboyance.

He did the almost impossible, weaving through the French midfield and defense before slotting the ball into the net. It was like a dream for every Ivorian fan in the pub, and Kwame, Adeoluwa, and Yannick were no different.

The eyes of the three students glistened with tears, but as men, they pushed the overwhelming emotions to the back of their minds, bracing for the next wave of tension as the game restarted.

The commentator's voice resonated through the speakers, exclaiming how Zachary, the flash of orange, had struck again to double Ivory Coast's lead. But he warned that the French were now more determined than ever.

The bar watched, silence again reigning supreme as the game resumed with France launching an immediate offensive. Paul Pogba quickly found Antoine Griezmann, who played the ball to Blaise Matuidi on the left wing.

Matuidi drove forward, attempting to skip past Serge Aurier, Ivory Coast's right wing-back. But Aurier was having none of it. He slid in with a hard tackle, sweeping Matuidi off his feet and sending the ball out of play.

The referee's whistle blew, awarding France a free kick close to the touchline while giving Aurier a stern verbal warning.

The French took the free kick quickly. Antoine Griezmann sent a curling ball over the Ivorian defense toward the box, but the alert Eric Bailly sped back and intercepted it, smashing it out of play for a throw-in.

The bar erupted in cheers and sighs of relief, Ivory Coast having survived another onslaught. Time seemed to be crawling as it was only the 50th minute.

The French took the throw-in with urgency. Lucas Hernandez launched the ball to Blaise Matuidi, who tried to control it with his chest but was immediately engaged by Franck Kessié. They fought for possession, jostling and pushing until the ball went out of play, this time for an Ivorian throw-in.

Kwame Bamba leaned over, commenting, "It seems Coach Hervé Renard and the boys are starting to manage the game."

Adeoluwa Soro nodded, adding, "That's the right thing to do at this point of the game. We're two goals ahead. We've got to waste as much time as possible and constantly break the play to stop France from building momentum."

Yannick Goué also chimed in, eyes brimming with hope. "We must stop France from scoring even a single goal. If the French get one back, the game will become tenuous. I don't want to suffer a heart attack because of the pressure during the final minutes."

The others laughed to let off some steam as the game continued on the big screen.

The French players tried to link play together and penetrate through the wings, but the Ivorian players were relentless. They fouled, tackled, and used every tactic in the book to break up the play. Each disruption brought cheers from the bar, the tension easing slightly with each passing minute.

Gradually, the game approached the 65th-minute mark. The score remained 2-0 in favor of Ivory Coast. Though still tense, the fans in the pub began to believe that their dream of World Cup glory might just come true. Every pass, tackle, and save was met with cheers or groans, the emotional rollercoaster of the match reflected in their extreme reactions.

Kwame, Adeoluwa, and Yannick huddled together, their eyes never leaving the screen. "We're so close," Kwame muttered, his voice tinged with hope and anxiety.

"It's already the 70th minute, and only 20 more minutes of normal playing time remain," Adeoluwa replied, his fists clenched. "We just need to hold on."

Yannick, ever the optimist, grinned, masking his anxiety. "We will. This seems to be our time. For sure, we can win."

The game pressed on, and with each passing second, the dream of victory seemed closer to becoming a reality. In Abidjan, the city's heartbeat pounded with anticipation, every cheer a testament to the unbreakable spirit of the Ivorian people.

But suddenly, the Ivorian fans grew quiet as the situation changed on the screens. Tension gripped the entire city as Paul Pogba suddenly played the ball expertly over the defense to find Kylian Mbappé unmarked and sprinting on the right flank.

Chapter 663 The Fight for Glory

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Kylian Mbappé raced forward as if his life depended on it as he anticipated the overhead ball from Paul Pogba. Time seemed to slow down, and he chested it forward with incredible finesse.

Wilfried Kanon, Ivory Coast's left wing-back, flashed forward to intercept him, but Mbappé deftly fed the ball past the Ivorian defender and raced ahead like Usain Bolt, leaving Kanon trailing in his wake.

Mbappé then cut back into the pitch, charging towards the box with unwavering determination. Eric Bailly, who had just made a timely recovery, rushed to stop him at the edge of the box.

But Mbappé danced left and right, his footwork exquisite and efficient, before breaking past Bailly and stepping into the box. With only Sylvain Gbohouo, the Ivorian keeper, to beat, Mbappé boldly unleashed a powerful shot aimed at the inside of the far post.

Gbohouo's instincts were spot on, though. He stretched out his leg and managed to block the shot. The stadium held its breath as the ball rebounded back into the path of Mbappé, who was ready to pull the trigger again.

Lamine Koné, the other Ivorian center-back, charged back, desperate to eliminate the danger. But Mbappé suckered him in with a feint, stepping towards the center before pulling the trigger again. The ball sailed past Gbohouo and into the net, and with that, he scored France's first goal of the night during the 74th minute.

The French fans erupted in celebration, their cheers reverberating through the stadium. They now felt that their team had a great chance of completing a comeback.

But Mbappé didn't join them in the celebration. He quickly picked the ball from the back of the net, raced back to the center, and placed it at the center spot. He exchanged silent nods with his teammates, and they swiftly retook their positions, their mannerisms resembling seasoned military men preparing for battle.

Their intentions were clear. They meant business and wanted to restart the game as quickly as possible.

In the Ivorian technical area, Coach Hervé Renard felt the pressure rising, his heart racing. France's goal had just made the situation on the field precarious.

His team was now only leading by a single goal, and with more than a quarter of an hour left in regular playing time on the clock, there was plenty of opportunity for the French to do more damage. He knew he had to act swiftly and decisively, starting with motivating his players.

Renard strode to the touchline, his voice cutting through the stadium din. "Don't lose heart! Defense! Give more than 100 percent! We are still leading! We are on the brink of a historic victory..." His words resonated with the players, and he could see them regaining their determination.

With his players reinvigorated, Renard turned his attention to the tactical error that had led to France's goal. He had noticed Wilfried Kanon showing signs of exhaustion earlier, as he had been marking the relentless Mbappé.

But still, Renard had delayed substituting Kanon, hoping he could continue doing a great job. But world-class players like Mbappé only need a moment of lapse to capitalize.

Recognizing the urgency, Renard called for a substitution when the ball went out of play for a throw-in. He swapped the exhausted Wilfried Kanon with Adama Traoré, a fresh left-back, to mark Mbappé and stop him from causing further damage. Additionally, he brought on Maxwel Cornet for Nicolas Pépé, hoping Cornet's fresh legs would aid Traoré in marking Mbappé.

On the opposite bench, the French coach, Didier Deschamps, responded with a substitution of his own. He replaced Blaise Matuidi with Ousmane Dembélé, seeking to bolster France's attacking prowess.

The game restarted after the substitutes took their positions. The French players resumed their relentless offensive, their spirits lifted by the goal they had just scored. They moved the ball around energetically, probing for gaps in the Ivorian defense.

But as often happens with teams focused on an aggressive comeback, the French left themselves vulnerable to counterattacks. This nearly cost them in the 81st minute when Franck Kessié, ever alert, intercepted a loose pass from Paul Pogba at the edge of the box. He quickly looked up and found Zachary just outside the defensive third.

Zachary received the ball on the half-turn, eyes scanning the field for an opportunity to counterattack. The tension in the stadium was palpable as the French fans held their breath, knowing how dangerous Zachary could be.

Zachary didn't hesitate and tried to pull away from N'Golo Kanté, but Kanté, reading the situation perfectly, took a daring risk. He swept in with another of his signature tackles, halting Zachary's charge forward and sending him tumbling to the ground with a thud.

An air of uncertainty immediately enveloped the pitch. N'Golo Kanté was already on a yellow card, yet the foul he had just committed against Zachary deserved another.

Some of the Ivorian players ran to the referee, demanding justice, while the French players stepped forward to plead their case. But after some deliberation, the referee gave Kanté only a verbal warning and awarded a free-kick to Ivory Coast.

Zachary lay on the ground, disappointment mingling with pain. He would have loved for Kanté to receive a red card, as the midfielder's boot had caught him on the shin of his right leg, causing considerable damage.

Moreover, the fact that even the VAR did not decree the foul as deserving of a red card added to his frustration. If he didn't know better, he would think the officials favored France.

His teammates gathered around him, worry evident on their faces. "Are you okay?" they asked, concern lacing their voices. But Zachary didn't know how to reply. He was just filled with frustration.

In the meantime, the referee summoned the on-pitch medical staff, who rushed to Zachary's side. They quickly pulled down his stocking and examined the injured area. His shin was already swelling, so they applied ice before helping him off the pitch to the sideline.

A tense air hung over the field as the game restarted without Zachary. The French quickly won back the ball and launched another swift attack, exploiting their temporary numerical advantage. They cut through the middle, where Zachary was absent, their passes flowing like running water.

Antoine Griezmann eventually found Paul Pogba at the edge of the box. Before the Ivorian defenders could react, Pogba prodded the ball forward to open the shooting angle and swiftly pulled the trigger. The ball flew off his boot with incredible speed, deflecting off Serey Dié's thigh and finding the back of the net.

Finally, the French had gotten their second and equalizing goal during the 84th minute. The score was now 2-2. They had taken advantage of Zachary's absence from the midfield to inflict significant damage.

Zachary was still receiving treatment on the sidelines. He felt his heart clench as he watched the French players celebrate. Ivory Coast had only needed to hold on for a few more minutes to win the World Cup, but now their task had become much more challenging.

As he brooded, Cheick Doukouré, one of the Ivorian substitutes, approached with a message from Coach Hervé Renard. The message consisted of a single question: Can you continue?

Zachary eagerly nodded and said yes. Although he still felt pain in his shin, there was no way he would step off the pitch and leave the match in the balance. He wanted World Cup glory and knew he had to see it through himself.

Seeing his resolve, Doukouré smiled and rushed back to deliver Zachary's response to the coach. The medics narrowed their eyes, seeming to want to offer some words of caution. But Zachary shut them down before they could speak.

He had a stock of vitality-enhancing elixirs, the rewards from winning the Champions League and the Serie A in the past season. Even if his injury worsened, he could rely on those elixirs to heal and achieve his peak quickly after the match. But as of now, he had to step back on the pitch and see the game through.

He told the medics to apply some pain relief to his shin. With a bit of coaxing, they agreed and sprayed his shin. As the drug was absorbed into his skin, he felt the pain ebb slightly, bringing some relief.

Feeling relieved that the injury might not be serious, he pulled up his stockings, got up, and headed to the touchline. At first, he limped, but then he started jogging until he reached the centerline. The referee quickly waved him on, and he rejoined the play, determined to grow back into the game.

A few seconds later, after the ball went out of play for a throw-in, Didier Deschamps, the French coach, called for a substitution. He took off N'Golo Kanté and brought on Steven Nzonzi, unwilling to risk keeping Kanté on the pitch with the threat of a red card hanging over him.

The game continued after that, with Zachary fighting through the pain and looking to help his team create more scoring opportunities. Ivory Coast's defense also tightened, knowing they had to withstand the French pressure in the final minutes.

Buoyed by the two goals they had just scored, the French players of course tried their best to create chances. They seamlessly blended wing-play tactics, short passes, and crosses as they searched for a breakthrough. But their efforts remained futile as the Ivorian players kept their lines tight, barring them from breaking through the middle.

As for Zachary, he moved with a purposeful efficiency, constantly avoiding unnecessary actions as his mind was focused on one objective. He was lurking and waiting for an opportunity. He was waiting for the French to make a mistake, and then he would pounce forward and capitalize on it.

Chapter 664 The Final Push

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The game trudged on, with France relentlessly attacking and throwing everyone forward in a desperate bid to break the deadlock. But the Ivorians defended like mad and held their ground.

The intent of the Ivorian players was clear to everyone watching: they would allow France to dominate possession, but there was no way in hell they would let the French forwards break through the middle and threaten their box. Keeping their lines tight, they constantly discouraged the French from making meaningful forward passes.

Minutes ticked by without any significant events, and finally, it was the 90th minute, with the score still 2-2. The fourth official on the sidelines put up the board, indicating an added six minutes of injury time.

The French players, noticing the added time, seemed to muster the strength for a few last pushes, hoping to score a winning goal and prevent the game from going into extra time.

France started their build-up from the defensive midfield, with the substitute defensive midfielder Steven Nzonzi playing the ball to the right wing to find Benjamin Pavard, the right-back.

Since all the Ivorian players were defending in front of the ball, Pavard had all the space he needed to make a daring run through the wing. He drove the ball forward before finally passing it to Kylian Mbappé, France's right winger.

Mbappé, phenomenal ever since he scored France's first goal, controlled the ball well and tried to step past Maxwell Cornet, the Ivorian left-back, who had fallen back to defend. But Mbappé's efforts soon turned fruitless as Adama Traoré, the wing-back, rushed forward to double-team him, stopping him from breaking inside.

Undeterred, Mbappé expertly played the ball into the space behind the two Ivorian players, finding Antoine Griezmann, who had timed his run perfectly towards the edge of the box.

Griezmann controlled the ball close to the left side of the box before cunningly squaring it back towards the circle of the eighteen and finding the arriving Paul Pogba.

Pogba received it and tried a swift snapshot from outside the box, hoping to recreate more heroics and score the winner. But Serey Dié threw himself forward, blocking the shot and stopping it from continuing on its trajectory to the goal.

The blocked ball rebounded and flew towards the right side of the box, where Serge Aurier received it. Ousmane Dembélé was closing him down, but Aurier skipped away gracefully.

Spotting Zachary already racing towards the other side of the pitch on the left wing, Aurier's instincts kicked in. He immediately fed the ball along the line, aiming to find Zachary and initiate a counterattack.

Aurier's pass was perfect, and Zachary connected with it on the half-turn, noting Steven Nzonzi closing down on him. Composed, Zachary feigned a rush along the touchline toward French territory.

Nzonzi, taking the bait, charged to block Zachary's run. But in the nick of time, Zachary abruptly halted, spinning past the defensive midfielder with the ball glued to his left foot. His elegance was unmatched, and suddenly, the field opened before him.

He saw that Raphaël Varane and Samuel Umtiti, the French center-backs, were out of position, having been involved in France's last build-up for their attack. His heart raced, and he didn't hesitate.

Heart racing, he bolted away from Nzonzi, who was now trying to grab his shirt, and charged toward France's box. Varane and Umtiti scrambled to catch up, but Zachary's SSS-grade speed was not for show.

Although he still felt the pain from N'Golo Kanté's earlier tackle, he pushed through, racing toward the box like a comet shooting through the sky.

The pain in his shin tried to slow him, but Zachary pushed it to the back of his mind. Everyone was on the edge of their seats as it was the 90th minute, and Zachary had a clear chance to score and put Ivory Coast ahead again.

Hugo Lloris, the French keeper, rushed out to meet him. But Zachary boldly held onto the ball a moment longer, and as Lloris approached, he dug his boot under the ball and looped it over the keeper's outstretched hands.

Tension mounted, the stadium holding its breath as the ball arced perfectly and bounced toward the back of the net. Raphaël Varane, having made a desperate recovery, charged back, hoping to intercept it. But before he could reach it, the ball bounced over the goal line, signifying that Zachary had just scored Ivory Coast's third goal in the 91st minute.

The stadium exploded with cheers from the Ivorian fans as the score on the jumbotron changed to 3:2. Zachary had completed a counterattack, scored a hat-trick, and bagged the 11th goal of his World Cup campaign, potentially the winning goal of the final.

However, he couldn't celebrate as the dash from the wing to the goal had taken everything out of him. The pain from his shin spiked, and he felt he couldn't continue, no matter how much he tried to force himself.

His teammates rushed to celebrate with him, but Zachary hurriedly told them he was injured. Wilfried Zaha, Eric Bailly, and the others narrowed their eyes, restraining themselves from jumping on him in celebration. They then signaled the referee and the technical bench, and the medics rushed onto the pitch.

When the medics pulled down Zachary's stocking, everyone gasped at the sight of his swollen shin. They couldn't believe he had sprinted past the French defenders with such an injury. What kind of tenacity did he have?

Zachary calmed them down. "It actually looks worse than it is," he assured them. Seeing them nod, he continued, "I'm sorry I can't continue. But keep fighting and hold on to the lead."

His teammates thumped their chests, with Zaha taking the lead. "You have done your part, Zachary. Now, rest well, and we'll see this through. We promise," they said one after another.

Zachary nodded and was then carried off the pitch on a stretcher. Cheick Doukouré immediately took his place, and the game resumed. The French players, now desperate, threw everything into their attempts to equalize.

They played like men possessed, launching offensive after offensive at the Ivorian defense. Even Raphaël Varane, known more for his defensive prowess, surged forward to initiate the attack.

Wilfried Zaha moved to intercept him, but Varane executed a perfect diagonal pass to Ousmane Dembélé on the left wing. Dembélé chested the ball down and attempted to sprint past Serge Aurier. However, Aurier, always sharp, executed a hard sliding tackle, sending Dembélé tumbling to the ground.

The French players cried foul, and the referee rushed to the scene, issuing a yellow card to Aurier and awarding France a free-kick.

Zachary was now watching from the bench while receiving treatment. He felt his heart clench. Such free-kicks were dangerous as they provided golden opportunities for the opponents to launch the ball into the box.

He watched with bated breath as Antoine Griezmann stepped up to take the free-kick. Griezmann sent a long, curling ball over the Ivorian defense towards the box. Players from both teams rushed to contest it, but Varane perfectly timed his run and came out on top. He angled his head, guiding the ball towards the top corner with textbook precision.

Zachary's heart sank as he saw the ball heading for the back of the net. He hoped for a miracle, perhaps for the ball to hit the post, but his wishes were in vain.

Unfortunately, the ball flew past Sylvain Gbohouo's outstretched hands and found the back of the net. On cue, the French fans, players, and coaches cheered with renewed vigor, their voices shaking the stadium.

Zachary felt something inside him break, tears welling up as he realized France had equalized. The game was headed into extra time, and he was already off the pitch. He covered his face with his hands, hoping to conceal his frustration and tears from the ever-watching cameras.

But just as he hit his lowest point, the atmosphere in the stadium suddenly changed. The cheers of the French fans abruptly stopped, replaced by groans and boos.

Zachary quickly removed his hands from his face and was pleasantly surprised. His mood lifted as he saw the referee pointing to his ear while the stadium jumbotron flashed the words "Checking Goal" and "Possible Offside." His spirits lifted from the depths, his heart pounding as the stadium waited with bated breath for the decision.

Finally, after a few tense moments, the VAR officials reached a decision. The words "Decision, No Goal" appeared on the large screen, indicating Varane was offside.

On seeing the verdict, Zachary was overwhelmed with emotion. He jumped up and yelled, wincing just as abruptly as his shin throbbed with pain. The medics who had just attended to him urged him to calm down, but Zachary couldn't let his injury dampen his joy.

Amidst the excitement, the pitch was engulfed in chaos as the French players swarmed the referee, passionately arguing their case. The linesmen intervened to restore order, and eventually, the situation calmed down.

As the game resumed, France made a final desperate attempt to turn the tables. However, the Ivorians, showing newfound composure, focused on keeping the French at bay.

Time seemed to crawl as France struggled to create any significant opportunities. But they couldn't find the back of the net, and after an excruciating eight minutes of added time, the referee finally brought the World Cup final to a close. Ivory Coast had finally emerged victorious.

Chapter 665 World Champions

665 World Champions

As the final whistle sounded, the French players collapsed on the grass, their frustration and exhaustion evident in their expressions. In stark contrast, the Ivory Coast players, fans, and bench erupted in cheers, their joyous shouts filling the Luzhniki Stadium in Moscow.

Zachary couldn't believe it. They had done it—they had won the World Cup. Tears of joy streamed down his face as the reality of their victory sank in. His teammates rushed from the pitch to celebrate with him, their faces alight with the joy of being world champions.

However, Coach Hervé Renard quickly stepped in, warning them to be careful and not to worsen Zachary's injury. Despite his stern tone, it was clear that the coach himself was just as emotional and overjoyed as the rest.

Renard gave Zachary a gentle pat on the shoulder. "Well done," he said, his voice thick with emotion. "You scored a hat-trick and helped us win the World Cup."

Zachary's teammates also exchanged high-fives with him, their joy evident in their mannerisms. The celebrations then began in earnest as the players embraced, laughed, and sang, their collective happiness creating a thrilling atmosphere in the stadium.

Meanwhile, the stadium crew swiftly set up for the trophy ceremony. Workers hurriedly assembled the podium at the center of the pitch, unfurling a massive banner that read "World Cup Champions."

The glittering World Cup trophy was then carefully placed on a pedestal, its golden surface gleaming under the stadium lights. The anticipation around the stadium intensified, compounded by the joy, disbelief, and pride that the Ivorian players and their supporters felt.

Soon enough, the Ivory Coast players gathered near the podium, their excitement mounting. The officials began organizing the ceremony, and the cheers of the African fans in the crowd grew louder.

Zachary was still overwhelmed with emotion. But he still found himself at the center of attention as his teammates gathered around him, reliving the moments of the just-concluded game.

The proceedings moved forward quickly, and the stadium announcer's voice suddenly boomed over the loudspeakers, "Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome the world champions, the World Cup winners, Ivory Coast!"

As the announcement sounded, the cheers of the Ivorian fans hit a crescendo, their voices shaking the entire stadium. Zachary soaked his mind in the excitement, his heart swelling with pride as he stood alongside his teammates.

The ceremony then commenced with the presentation of individual awards. First, the Best Young Player award was announced, and the spotlight turned to Kylian Mbappé. Despite the loss, the young French star received a warm ovation as he stepped forward to accept his award, his talent undeniable.

Next came the Best Goalkeeper award. The announcer's voice rang out, "The award for Best Goalkeeper goes to Sylvain Gbohouo of Ivory Coast!" The Ivorian goalkeeper, a key figure in their triumph, walked up to the podium, greeted by applause and cheers. He lifted the award high, a Cheshire cat's grin on his face.

The anticipation built as the announcer moved on to the Golden Boot award. "With an incredible 11 goals in this World Cup campaign, the Golden Boot goes to Zachary Bemba!"

Since he was still nursing his injury, Zachary hobbled to the podium with the support of Eric Bailly. The crowd cheered as he accepted the award, the Ivorian fans singing his name animatedly.

His emotions overwhelmed him as he held the Golden Boot, the culmination of his hard work and dedication. He felt blissful as such fulfilling moments were what he had always been chasing, what he had always yearned to experience ever since his rebirth.

But the accolades didn't stop there. The announcer continued, "And the Golden Ball for the best player of the World Cup also goes to Zachary Bemba!"

The stadium once again erupted in cheers as Zachary accepted the prestigious award. His teammates surrounded him, their pride and joy evident. Zachary couldn't help but be overwhelmed by the magnitude of the moment.

The presentation of the individual medals for both teams quickly followed, and finally, the moment everyone had been waiting for arrived.

The stadium fell silent as Gianni Infantino, the FIFA president, stepped forward, holding the World Cup trophy. The Ivorian captain, Gervinho, was called to receive the trophy on behalf of the team. Although he didn't play the final because of an injury, he was still the man to do the honors.

Gervinho's face beamed with pride as he stepped forward on the podium. The president handed him the trophy, and Gervinho raised it above his head.

The stadium exploded in celebration. Confetti rained down, the golden flakes shimmering in the stadium lights. The Ivorian players gathered around their captain, each wanting to touch the trophy—to feel the reality of their achievement. They had done it. Against all odds, they had won the World Cup.

As the celebrations continued on the pitch, the players' emotions were a mix of joy, relief, and disbelief. Zachary, despite his injury, was at the heart of the celebration. Eventually, his teammates couldn't resist the urge to lift him onto their shoulders, carrying him around the pitch in a victory lap. The fans chanted his name, their footballing icon, their champion.

Coach Hervé Renard, usually composed, couldn't hide his tears of joy. He hugged each of his players, his pride evident. This victory was not just a win on the field but a testament to their hard work, unity, and determination. They had faced formidable opponents, overcome challenges, and emerged victorious.

The ceremony eventually moved to a more personal celebration. The players' immediate families joined them on the pitch, sharing the moment.

Zachary was the odd man out, as he no longer had any close family members ever since his grandma had passed away. There was, of course, his biological mom. Their relationship had improved over the past three years, but they were still not that close.

Though all that wouldn't dampen his spirits at such a momentous occasion.

The celebrations moved forward, and the media eventually swarmed the pitch, capturing the historic moment. Interviews were conducted, and Zachary found himself in front of a microphone. "Zachary, how does it feel to win the World Cup and receive the Golden Boot and Golden Ball?" a reporter asked.

Zachary, still emotional, took a moment to compose himself. "I just can't explain the feeling," he began. "This is a dream come true. We worked so hard for this, and to finally achieve it, it's surreal. I couldn't have done it without my teammates, our coach, and the support of our fans. This victory is for everyone who has always believed in us."

"Your performance was phenomenal, especially those solo runs you made for the last two goals," said the reporter. "Can you describe what went through your mind during those moments?"

"Sure," Zachary replied. "For both goals, when I got the ball, I saw a bit of space and decided to go for it. I knew the French defense was strong, but I trusted my speed and ability to navigate through. As I ran past their defenders, I focused on keeping my composure and ensuring I placed the shots well. And both times, the ball hit the back of the net, and the adrenaline rush was incredible."

The reporter continued, "Those final minutes should have been tense after you were forced off the pitch due to injury. What was going through your mind during those final moments?"

Zachary smiled, a mix of relief and joy in his eyes. "I was praying for the whistle to blow. The tension was unbearable, but when it finally ended, it was pure joy. I'm grateful for this moment... and I'll cherish it forever."

"Lastly, what message do you have for the fans back home who have been cheering for you all along?"

Zachary took a deep breath and sighed. "I want to say a massive thank you to all our fans. Your support has been incredible, and it means the world to us. This victory is for you as much as it is for us. We felt your energy and passion every step of the way, and it motivated us to give our all. Thank you for believing in us and celebrating this historic moment with us. We couldn't have done it without you."

The interview soon ended, but the celebrations didn't stop. The Ivorian team eventually moved to the locker room, where the party showed no signs of slowing down. Music blared, and the players danced, their joy infectious. The World Cup trophy was passed around, each player taking a moment to hold it, to feel the weight of their achievement.

Zachary sat down after a while, his injury forcefully reminding him to take it easy. He looked around at his teammates, their faces glowing with happiness.

This victory wasn't just for Ivory Coast; it was a triumph for the entire African continent. They had made history as the first African nation to claim the World Cup. And as the age-old adage goes, where there was a first, a second would surely be within reach.

Their unprecedented achievement sparked an ardent hope in Zachary that it would ignite a fire within African athletes, propelling them to strive for greatness and bring even more glory to their nations.

Amid his thoughts, Coach Renard gathered the team together. "I just want to say how proud I am of all of you," he began. "You played your hearts out during this World Cup campaign, and this victory is a result of your hard work, dedication, and unity. Enjoy this moment because you've earned it."

The players cheered, pumping their fists in the air. "To victory!" they shouted in unison. The party continued late into the night, the joy of their triumph echoing through the stadium.

Chapter 666 The Morning After and System Mission Completion

666 The Morning After and System Mission Completion

The day dawned crisp and clear over Moscow, the city bathed in the golden light of the summer morning. Inside the luxurious confines of the team hotel, Zachary Bemba stirred groggily in his bed.

It was already 10:00 AM, a late start for someone as disciplined as him, but the night before had been a rollercoaster of celebrations. Ivory Coast had clinched the World Cup, and Zachary had become the tournament's top scorer and best player, earning him the coveted Golden Boot and Golden Ball.

Despite the triumph, exhaustion weighed heavily on him. His body, conditioned to endure the rigors of professional football, still ached from the previous day's exertions.

His shin also throbbed painfully—a reminder of the knock he had taken in the final. The team medics had provided only some first aid, and now, every step was a sharp reminder of the grueling match he had endured with his teammates.

He longed to continue sleeping, but as a professional athlete, discipline won out. He forced himself to get out of bed, aware that he needed to take some breakfast and address his throbbing shin.

Zachary shuffled to the bathroom with the help of his clutches, hoping to freshen up. The cool water splashed on his face brought a semblance of alertness. After he was done, he donned his Ivory Coast tracksuit, its bright colors a welcome contrast to his tired reflection in the mirror. He switched on his phone, and immediately, a flood of messages began to fill the screen.

He smiled as he scrolled through the numerous congratulatory messages. They came from all corners of the globe—former teammates and coaches, endorsement brand representatives, and even strangers whose lives had been touched by his performance. One message, however, stood out. It was from Coach Damata, the old football mentor from Lubumbashi, DR Congo.

Seeing the message, Zachary felt some guilt. He couldn't help but imagine how wonderful it would have been to win the World Cup for his home nation. For a moment, the thought lingered, filled with the bittersweet notion of what could have been.

But reality soon anchored him. He had already changed his nationality, and nothing would alter that. Moreover, the DR Congo team lacked the experience and collective skills to win the World Cup.

Although he couldn't deny his guilt, he resolved to support DR Congo's football through other means, particularly his project with Mr. Stein to establish football academies in the country.

With a mental note to accelerate his plans for the academies, Zachary picked up his clutches and headed toward the door, eager for breakfast. Just as he was about to leave, his phone rang. It was Emily Anderson, his agent. He answered, her voice bubbling with excitement.

"Zachary! Congratulations! World Cup champion, Golden Ball, and Golden Boot winner! How does it feel?" Emily's enthusiasm was infectious.

"Thanks, Emily. It feels surreal. I can't believe we did it," Zachary replied, smiling even though he was on the phone.

In the background, he heard another familiar voice. "Congratulations, Zachary!" It was Kristin, his long-time friend and PR manager.

"Thank you, Kristin," Zachary responded warmly.

Emily's tone suddenly shifted to one of concern. "Zachary, how's your injury? I saw how you were hobbling during the celebrations last night."

Zachary hesitated, trying to downplay the seriousness of his injury. He had a card up his sleeve—the few vials of potent elixirs in the system inventory. As long as he used one of the vitality-enhancing elixirs, he would heal almost immediately. "It's just a small knock. I got better after the on-pitch medics gave me some first aid," he said casually.

"Are you sure? Your health is important. I really think you should get it checked out properly," Emily insisted.

"I'm okay, really. No need to worry," Zachary reassured her, though he could sense her skepticism.

Emily sighed, clearly not convinced. "Even if you're alright, you should still have your shin checked by a doctor."

"I promise I'll get a check-up later," Zachary said, trying to appease her.

There was a brief pause before Emily changed the topic. "Alright, enough about that. I want us to resolve your transfer situation as quickly as possible. When can we meet to discuss the offers from the Premier League clubs?"

Zachary considered his schedule. "I'm leaving Moscow and heading back to Abidjan with the team tomorrow morning. If it's urgent, we can meet this afternoon. Otherwise, we can wait until I'm back in Europe."

"It's urgent, Zachary. Your transfer situation has dragged on long enough. The club representatives are constantly on my case. We need to meet this afternoon and finalize your decision."

Zachary agreed, knowing it was time to make a choice. "Okay, let's meet at the hotel this afternoon. I have nothing else scheduled for the day."

They finalized the plan and hung up. Zachary shoved the phone back into his pocket with a smile. But he didn't continue heading out for breakfast.

The conversation with Emily had reminded him of something important. Instead of hobbling around on crutches and attracting unnecessary attention from the press and teammates, he should consume the vitality-enhancing elixirs in his system inventory to heal his injury quickly.

With his mind made up, Zachary settled back on the bed and summoned the system's translucent interface. It appeared out of thin air, like a spectacle from a sci-fi movie, shimmering before him.

He navigated to the system inventory and selected one of the elixirs he had kept there since receiving it as a reward for winning the previous season's Serie A title with Juventus.

The S-grade vitality-enhancing elixir was like he remembered, shaped like a tiny banana. He had resisted the urge to take it before the World Cup, knowing it could affect his control over his body, thus hindering him from being at his peak during the tournament. But now, with no immediate competitive matches coming up, there was nothing to stop him.

He readily swallowed the elixir, feeling its effects almost immediately. A refreshing sensation spread throughout his body, focusing on his injured shin.

The discomfort was intense but brief, lasting only about thirty seconds before an invigorating sensation took over. Zachary felt his physique grow slightly more robust, but more importantly, his shin was as good as new. The elixir had worked its magic.

Smiling, Zachary decided to also take the SS-graded version of the vitality-enhancing elixir, one of the rewards for winning the Champions League with Juventus the previous season. The SS-grade elixir was also shaped like a tiny banana—but much more potent.

He swallowed it and felt his blood boil. His bones became ticklish, and the pain washed over him in waves as it worked its magic. Fortunately, the discomfort lasted about five minutes, after which a refreshing feeling washed over him.

He could feel his body growing immune to the SS-grade elixirs, offering diminishing returns. He needed more potent elixirs to continue enhancing his abilities.

Fortunately, with the World Cup victory, he was about to acquire some SSS-grade elixirs, which would improve his attributes significantly as he prepared to join the English Premier League.

Suppressing his excitement, Zachary decided to check his current attributes. He called out to the system in his mind, instructing it to bring up his Physical Fitness and Soccer Technique stats. The system AI responded, and the translucent screen shimmered before displaying the required information.

->Physical Fitness (Av. Rating: SSS)

Balance and Coordination: SS+

Agility: SSS

Strength: SS+

Stamina: SSS

Endurance Points: 98,500/110,000 (SSS)

->Soccer Technique: (Av. Rating: SS+)

Ball Control: SS

Dribbling Skills: SS+

Passing Accuracy: SS

Body Control: SS+

Zachary sighed as he stared at the information displayed on the system interface. As expected, none of his attributes had experienced an upgrade after he consumed the elixir. It was clear that his body had grown immune to the effects of the SS-grade elixirs due to his already high stats.

He quickly calmed himself, pushing aside the frustration. There was another task at hand, one he had resisted the previous night amid celebrations.

He needed to check his mission completion details for the 2018 FIFA World Cup Challenge. More importantly, he was eager to receive the rewards from the system. With his eyes alight with anticipation, he called out to the system AI in his mind and instructed it to bring up the mission completion details.

#5 new messages

CONGRATULATIONS

->You have completed the system mission (2018 FIFA World Cup Challenge).

->Mission Summary

*Milestone 1: Play over 75% of the fixtures of the 2018 FIFA World Cup for Ivory Coast (Completed; Rating S; Rewarded 1,000 Juju points).

*Milestone 2: Help Ivory Coast qualify from group B to the 'round-of-sixteen' stage of the 2018 FIFA World Cup tournament. (Completed; Rating SS; Rewarded 40,000 Juju points).

*Milestone 3: Help Ivory Coast qualify for the quarter-finals stage of the 2018 FIFA World Cup Tournament (Completed by scoring a brace that helped your team qualify; Rating SS; Rewarded 100,000 Juju points).

*Milestone 4: Help Ivory Coast qualify for the semi-final stage of the 2018 FIFA World Cup tournament (Completed by scoring one of the goals that helped your team qualify; Rating S; Rewarded 200,000 Juju points).

*Milestone 5: Help Ivory Coast qualify for the 2018 FIFA World Cup finals (Completed by scoring two of the three goals that helped your team qualify; Rating SS; Rewarded 500,000 Juju points).

08:10

*Milestone 6: Help Ivory Coast overcome all odds and become the champions of the 2018 FIFA World Cup tournament (Completed by scoring a hat-trick that helped your team become champions; Rating SSS; Rewarded a dosage of an SSS-grade mental conditioning elixir).

*Milestone 7: Become the top scorer and win the 2018 FIFA World Cup Golden Boot (Completed by scoring 11 goals for Ivory Coast in their World Cup campaign; Rating SS; Rewarded a dosage of an SSS-grade vitality-enhancing elixir).

*Milestone 8: Become the best player of the 2018 FIFA World Cup tournament and win the Golden Ball (Completed; Rating SSS; Rewarded a dosage of an SSS-grade Spatial Awareness Conditioning elixir).

->Mission completed rating: Beyond Exceptional!

Overall Mission Rating: SS

->Mission Rewards

1) A total of 841,000 Juju points.

2) A dosage of an SSS-grade mental conditioning elixir.

3) A dosage of an SSS-grade vitality-enhancing elixir.

4) A dosage of an SSS-grade Spatial Awareness Conditioning elixir.

->Bonus Rewards for the beyond exceptional performance!

1) A Random Technique Upgrade Token.

->Please note that the SSS-grade rewards and the Random Technique Upgrade Token are items beyond the current system level. Please upgrade the system if you wish to receive them.

Chapter 667 The Long-Overdue System Upgrade

667 The Long-Overdue System Upgrade

A smile spread across Zachary's face as he read the system mission completion message on the translucent interface. The three SSS-grade elixirs promised immense benefits, far more potent than the SS-grade ones he had just used.

His eyes then fell on the Random Technique Upgrade Token. Though he wasn't exactly sure what it did, he felt excited at the prospect of its potential.

"System, what does the Random Technique Upgrade Token do?" he asked, his mind brimming with anticipation.

The system AI responded immediately. "The Random Technique Upgrade Token is one of the high-end system rewards. When used, it will randomly improve one of your Football Technique stats by a level. This includes Ball Control, Dribbling Skills, Passing Accuracy, and Body Control."

Zachary's excitement spiked. His ball skills had always been one of the most challenging aspects of his game to improve. They required natural talent and relentless training from a young age.

Over the years, he had elevated them to the SS and SS+ grades, making him one of the best players in the world. But to become the undisputed best, the GOAT, he needed to push beyond those almost unbreachable boundaries. Every physical fitness, football technique stat, and attribute of his had to reach the SSS grade or beyond.

For physical fitness, game intelligence, and spatial awareness, he had now obtained the three SSS-grade elixirs to start the process. As for his techniques, the Random Technique Upgrade Token was his key to further enhancement.

The thought of how much he would improve after using these rewards filled him with an almost unbearable excitement. He could envision himself becoming a beast on the pitch, a force no opponent would dare to challenge.

Suppressing his excitement, Zachary focused on the last message on the system interface. It mentioned that the SSS-grade rewards and the Random Technique Upgrade Token were items beyond the current system level and that he needed to upgrade the system to receive them.

The news was a bit of a letdown, but not too much. Zachary already had the required Juju points to upgrade the system.

The last time he had upgraded the system was over three years ago, just before signing with Juventus. After that, he had become less reliant on the system as his physical fitness improved, allowing him to master skills and maneuvers through sheer training.

But now, with the opportunity to receive such significant rewards, he had to upgrade the system again. It was a necessary step on his journey to claiming a top seat among the greatest footballers of his generation and even in the entire history of the sport.

With his mind at ease, Zachary navigated to the system's translucent home page and looked at the contents.

GOAT SYSTEM

SYSTEM LEVEL: 5 (1,921,100/1,000,000 Juju points to level up)

USER: Zachary Bemba

AGE: 23 years

TALENT ASSESSMENT: Grade-SS+

JUUU-POINTS: 1,921,100

(Evaluation: One of the very best at the moment and the entire history of football)

USER MENU

*USER STATS

*GOAT MISSIONS

*SYSTEM SHOP

*SYSTEM LOTTERY

*SNOOPING TOOL

*TRAINING TOOLS

A complicated feeling emerged within Zachary as he looked at the contents of the system's home page. He couldn't help but remember when he had just undergone a rebirth and obtained the system.

He had been so reliant on the various system functions, desperate to raise his then-mediocre talent. But now, he was already an SS+ grade talent, one of the 'very best' in football history, at least according to the system. He felt a swell of pride, sensing that he was just a thin line away from the threshold of previously unreachable greatness.

Zachary calmed himself and turned to his next task: upgrading the system. With 1,921,100 Juju points accumulated, nothing was stopping him. He called to the system in his mind and instructed it to commence the upgrade.

The system responded, informing him that one million Juju points would be deducted to upgrade from level 5 to level 6 and that it would shut down for 72 hours during the upgrade process. That also meant he wouldn't access any of its functions until the 72 hours elapsed.

"Confirm the upgrade," Zachary commanded without hesitation.

A translucent accept button appeared on the screen before him. He tapped it, and the system quickly began its familiar upgrade sequence. After watching for a while, he disengaged the interface, his thoughts turning to the hunger gnawing at him. He needed breakfast.

Since the elixirs had already cured his injured shin, he no longer needed crutches. Walking boldly out of his room, he headed to the restaurant. As he arrived, he found his teammates still having breakfast. Like him, they must have woken up quite late after celebrating until late the previous night.

Eric Bailly looked up and grinned. "Look who's finally awake! Sleepyhead!"

Wilfried Zaha laughed and said, "There's our hat-trick hero!"

Zachary ignored their teasing and greeted his teammates. Their faces still glowed with satisfaction after beating France and winning the World Cup. He could feel the positive energy radiating from each of them as if the victory had added something extra to their auras. They exuded boundless confidence and excitement.

Sylvain Gbohouo, always observant, noticed Zachary's absence of crutches. "Hey, Zachary, you're not using crutches anymore. Did you get better?"

Hearing the question, the other Ivorian players around the tables also realized the abnormality and glanced at Zachary questioningly. Zachary, of course, couldn't explain that he used some mythical elixirs to instantly heal his injury. He downplayed his response.

"I told you guys, the injury looked worse than it actually was. The first aid treatment I received from the medics after the game did the trick. I can walk normally now. But I still can't do rigorous exercises."

His teammates seemed to buy the explanation, nodding and returning to their meals. Zachary settled down at one of the tables, joining them for breakfast. The room was then filled with laughter and lively conversation, everyone basking in the afterglow of their historic win.

As he enjoyed his meal, Zachary couldn't help but reflect on his journey again. From a player of mediocre talent to one of the best in the world. He had come a long way!

The system had been instrumental in his rise, and now, with the impending upgrade, he was on the brink of achieving even greater things. The following 72 hours would be a test of patience, but the wait would be worth it as he would receive the SSS grade elixirs and the Random Technique upgrade token after the upgrade.

After breakfast, Zachary excused himself from the lively dining hall, weaving through the maze of jubilant teammates. He longed for some solitude before meeting Emily, a quiet interlude where he could escape into the pages of the sports manga he had ordered some days prior.

This year had been a relentless vortex of training sessions and high-stakes matches, and he desperately needed some downtime to recharge.

Some of his teammates tried to rope him into various activities as he headed to his room. Eric Bailly and Nicolas Pépé wanted him to join a spirited PlayStation tournament. Wilfried Zaha and Serge Aurier proposed a tour around Moscow, promising an adventure filled with sightseeing and fun.

Though their offers were tempting, Zachary politely declined. Today, he had a singular goal: to be lazy and unwind in the comfort of his hotel room.

Seeing his stance, his teammates finally relented, letting him go with understanding nods and a few good-natured jibes about him being a monk. Zachary chuckled and waved them off, grateful for their comradeship but eager to enjoy some rare alone time.

Back in his room, he settled into the comfy armchair on his balcony, the city of Moscow sprawling below him. With a sigh of contentment, he opened the manga and began to read.

The world of fiction enveloped him, offering a delightful escape from the real-world pressures of professional football. Occasionally, he looked up from the pages to take in the view, marveling at the blend of historic architecture and modern skyscrapers. Life was just that good!

When hunger or thirst struck, he ordered room service. The beautiful Russian waitresses swiftly delivered his meals, their presence a fleeting distraction from his otherwise tranquil retreat. Winning the World Cup had certainly afforded him some luxuries, and he relished every moment.

Hours flew by in a blissful blur until the clock struck 1:00 PM. Zachary reluctantly put down his manga as he realized that Emily would arrive at the hotel to discuss his transfer situation in about an hour.

He took a quick shower, the cool water refreshing him for the upcoming meeting. Once dressed, he joined his teammates for a hearty lunch in the restaurant, enjoying the light-hearted banter and sharing excitement over their recent triumph.

After lunch, Zachary moved to one of the private booths, seeking a quieter spot to prepare for his meeting. He pulled out his phone and called Emily, informing her of his location.

She responded promptly, saying she would be there with Kristin in around ten minutes. With everything in place, Zachary hung up, feeling a mix of anticipation and excitement bubbling within him.

As he waited, he couldn't help but think about the Premier League offers Emily had mentioned. His heart raced at the prospect of joining one of the top clubs in England, taking his career to new heights.

The World Cup victory had been a monumental achievement. But he knew that his journey was far from over. There were new challenges to conquer and new records to set, and Zachary was more than ready to embrace them.

Chapter 668 The Crucial Decision

668 The Crucial Decision

The private booth at the luxurious Moscow hotel was a haven of privacy and comfort, adorned with rich wooden paneling and plush leather seats.

The soft hum of the air conditioner provided a gentle backdrop to the anticipation Zachary felt as he waited for Emily and Kristin to arrive. Moments later, the door swung open, and both women entered, their smiles lighting up the room.

Emily was her usual epitome of professionalism, with her long brown hair tied into a neat ponytail. Her blue lady's suit, perfectly tailored, matched the striking color of her eyes.

Kristin, on the other hand, exuded a more casual elegance. Her blonde hair cascaded down her face like a waterfall, framing her features beautifully. She wore a flower-patterned white dress that accentuated her lean yet gorgeous figure.

As they stepped in, their enchanting smiles brought an immediate warmth to the booth. Zachary stood up from the sofa, greeting them with warm hugs. Their congratulations flowed freely, celebrating his monumental achievements: winning the World Cup, the Golden Boot, and the Golden Ball.

"Where are your awards, by the way? I want to touch them and bask in your glory," Kristin teased, smiling warmly.

Zachary chuckled, shaking his head. "I don't have them with me. It would be a joke if I kept them on my person and then ended up losing them to a thief in a hotel. I gave them to the hotel management for safekeeping in their safe."

Kristin nodded, understanding. "That makes sense, but you must let me touch them at some point."

"Of course," Zachary promised, still smiling.

Suddenly, a beautiful Russian girl clad in a captivating waitress uniform entered the booth. She did a double-take upon noticing Zachary, her professional composure momentarily slipping. But she quickly collected herself and took their orders. They each asked for juice and a few snacks, and the waitress hurried off, leaving the room once more private.

Emily leaned back with a teasing glint in her eye. "That waitress was clearly smitten by you, Zach. You should consider getting her number."

Zachary laughed. "When did you switch from being my agent to my wingman?"

They shared a few more laughs, their friendship evident and comforting. But soon, Emily's expression turned solemn. She locked eyes with Zachary and placed five files on the table between them.

"I've analyzed all the offers coming in from the Premier League," she began, her tone professional and focused. "These are the most attractive, fitting your status and career goals."

Zachary's gaze shifted to the files. The names of the clubs were printed on the covers, each representing a potential future. Emily's seriousness mirrored the weight of the decision before him.

"Which of these clubs will you consider?" Emily asked, her voice solemn.

Zachary took a deep breath, his mind racing as he surveyed the files Emily placed on the table. The labels were clear: Manchester United, Manchester City, Liverpool, Arsenal, and Tottenham—the titans of the English Premier League.

With her usual poise, Emily commented that the offers from all the clubs were almost identical, given that Zachary was a free agent. She then fell silent, waiting for him to make his decision.

Zachary immediately dismissed Manchester City. Joining a club that dominated the league every year would not present the kind of challenge he sought.

Moreover, the World Cup had taught him that the system rewarded him more for achieving the seemingly impossible. Easy victories would not yield the SSS-grade elixirs and Technique Upgrade tokens he desired to push his skills to the GOAT level.

His gaze then passed over the files for Arsenal, Chelsea, and Tottenham, but none of those clubs felt right to him.

When he reached the file for Manchester United, he hesitated. The club's history and struggles made it an intriguing option, offering the best challenge. Yet, the issues at United seemed deeply rooted in their management and structure—problems that even his presence might not solve. With a sigh, he set the file aside.

His eyes finally settled on Liverpool's file, and his face lit up. Liverpool had built a formidable team and had a coach known for extracting the best from his players. Additionally, partnering with Sadio Mané and Mohamed Salah tickled his anticipation, as they would create a lethal attacking trio if he joined Liverpool.

Now came the question of potential system missions. Although Liverpool was destined to win the UEFA Champions League the following season, leaving no chance for an immediate system mission with SSS-grade rewards, there were still the FA Cup, the EFL Cup, and the Premier League to conquer. He could challenge for those in his first season.

Emily, sensing his indecision, cut in gently. "Are you finding it hard to decide?"

Zachary didn't reply. Instead, he picked up the Liverpool file. Emily and Kristin exchanged knowing glances, their smiles indicating they had anticipated this choice.

Emily quickly gathered the other files and tucked them into her oversized handbag, leaving only Liverpool's on the table. She opened it and pulled out two sheets of paper, handing them to Zachary.

"These summarize the offers from Liverpool's representatives," Emily explained. "Read through them, and let me know if I should proceed with negotiations."

Zachary nodded, acknowledging her words, and picked up the papers. The first sheet detailed the financial aspects of Liverpool's offer. He quickly skimmed through the figures, noting the impressive terms:

Wages

Weekly Salary: £350,000

Signing Bonus

Signing Bonus: £20 million

Performance Bonuses

Goal Bonus: £20,000 per goal

Assist Bonus: £10,000 per goal-assist

Appearance Bonus per Game: £20,000 per appearance

Match Winning Bonus per Game: £50,000 per game the team wins

Achievement Bonuses

Champions League Victory Bonus: £1.5 million

Premier League Title Bonus: £1 million

FA Cup Victory Bonus: £500,000

EFL Cup Victory Bonus: £300,000

Ballon d'Or Win Bonus: £1 million

Team of the Year Bonus: £500,000

Player of the Month Bonus: £25,000

Player of the Season Bonus: £100,000

League Top Scorer Bonus: £100,000

Image Rights and Sponsorships

Percentage of Image Rights: 60%

Exclusive Club Sponsorship Deals: Additional earnings from club-specific sponsorship deals.

Welfare and Lifestyle Offers

Luxury Housing: A high-end property in Liverpool. It will be fully paid for by the club.

Car Allowance: Three luxury cars provided by the club.

Private Jet Access: Limited access to a private jet for personal use.

Personal Staff: Provision for a personal chef, driver, and security detail.

Relocation Assistance: Comprehensive support for relocating Zachary's immediate family and subordinates to Liverpool, including schooling for children, if applicable.

Health and Fitness

08:15

Medical Coverage: Full medical and dental coverage for Zachary and his immediate family.

Personal Physio and Fitness Trainer: Dedicated personal physio and fitness trainer provided by the club.

Recovery Facilities: Access to the latest recovery technology and facilities, including cryotherapy chambers and state-of-the-art gym equipment.

Contract Length and Extension Options

Initial Contract Length: 4 years, with an option to extend the contract an additional year.

Automatic Extension Clause: Automatic one-year extension triggered by performance metrics (e.g., number of appearances or goals).

Release Clause: £150 million

Zachary's eyes sparkled as he scanned the pages before him. The numbers were dazzling—English clubs certainly knew how to entice players with comprehensive bonuses for almost every conceivable achievement. Excited, he looked up at Emily and asked for her professional opinion.

Emily leaned back slightly, her expression thoughtful as she began. "Let's start with the weekly wage. They're offering £350,000, which is fantastic and according to the top standards of Premier League clubs. Of course, I'll push for the highest possible figure during the final negotiations."

Zachary nodded, appreciating her frankness. Emily moved on to the signing bonus. "They're offering £20 million, which is a strong figure, especially since you're a free agent who just won the World Cup and is a strong contender for the Ballon d'Or. However, given your status, I strongly believe we can negotiate this up to at least £30 million."

Zachary's excitement grew. A signing bonus of £30 million would be monumental.

Emily continued, addressing the performance bonuses. "These are very generous. Premier League clubs typically offer such bonuses, and they don't usually budge on these, so there's no need to push for more here. The same applies to the achievement bonuses—they're already quite substantial."

She paused, glancing at the next section of the contract. "Now, about the Image Rights. Liverpool is offering you 60%. This is good, but I strongly believe we can push for at least 70%."

Zachary cut in, curiosity piqued. "Can you explain the Image Rights and Sponsorship section?"

Emily smiled, nodding. "Of course. Image rights pertain to the commercial use of your likeness—your name, image, and other personal attributes in advertising and promotional materials carried out by the club. Essentially, it's about how much control you have over your personal brand and how much revenue you earn from it."

"If you control a higher percentage of your image rights, you get a larger share of the profits from endorsements and sponsorship deals offered to the club under your banner. Sponsorships are agreements where brands pay the club and you to promote their products or services. Having a higher percentage means more income from these deals."

Understanding dawned on Zachary's face, and he nodded. Emily moved on to the other benefits. "The benefits they have offered are pretty standard—luxurious housing, state-of-the-art training facilities, personal physiotherapists, and comprehensive medical care. We won't push for more here. However, we need to address the Release Clause of £150 million."

Emily's tone turned serious. "I've already spoken to Liverpool's representatives. They're adamant about the release clause. The club wants to ensure they don't lose players to other clubs after investing so heavily in them."

Zachary understood the importance of the release clause. It was a safeguard for Liverpool, ensuring that only a club willing to pay a substantial fee could lure him away. "That makes sense. I'm okay with the release clause."

Emily nodded, her eyes gleaming with determination. "Excellent. I'll proceed with the negotiations and aim to secure the best possible terms for you."

Zachary felt a wave of gratitude towards Emily. Her expertise and dedication were invaluable, as always. "Thank you, Emily. I trust you completely."

Kristin, who had been quietly observing, chimed in with a warm smile. "You're in good hands, Zach. Emily will make sure you get the best deal possible."

Emily gathered the papers, slipping them back into the file. "I'll get started on this immediately. We should have a finalized contract soon."

Chapter 669 Homecoming Glory

669 Homecoming Glory

Zachary couldn't contain his excitement after he heard Emily's promise. The prospect of competing in the English Premier League, the most-watched football league in the world, filled him with anticipation.

He felt a deep sense of satisfaction within him as Emily made a few phone calls while Kristin offered her silent support. The path ahead was clear, and he was ready to take the next step in his remarkable journey.

The beautiful Russian waitress returned with their drinks and snacks, her cheeks blushing as she served Zachary. Emily, who had just finished her phone calls, couldn't resist another playful nudge. "Seems like you've made quite an impression," she teased.

Zachary just smiled, choosing not to respond, while Kristin watched from the side with a barely noticeable flicker of emotion in her eyes.

Before long, the conversation lightened, turning to their upcoming move from Turin to Liverpool. They delved into discussions about their future home, speculating what life in Liverpool would bring and sharing the thrill of starting afresh. The private booth resonated with laughter and a strong sense of friendship.

In the middle of their conversation, Kristin suddenly brought up Zachary's return trip to Abidjan, Ivory Coast, scheduled for the next day. "I'm planning to travel tonight so I can arrive before you and organize your schedule in Abidjan," she informed him.

Zachary nodded appreciatively. "Thank you, Kristin. I'm grateful for everything you and Emily have done for me since my academy days."

Just then, a thought crossed Zachary's mind, and he leaned forward slightly. "Kristin, can you organize a private chartered plane from Abidjan to Bukavu, DR Congo? I want to travel silently and quietly back to my birthplace to pay homage to my late grandma since I've just won the World Cup. But I don't want the public to know about my trip."

Kristin's eyes narrowed slightly, but she nodded professionally. "Of course, Zachary. I'll make all the arrangements."

Emily, however, frowned. "Zachary, I'm concerned about your safety. DR Congo is often reported on international news as politically unstable, and you defected from there to play for another country. It might not be safe."

Zachary smiled reassuringly. "I understand your concerns, Emily. But the subordinates of Mr. Stein, Kristin's grandfather, are already in Bukavu setting up the foundation for the first football academy in DR Congo. They will take care of me."

Kristin readily supported his claim. "Yes, Emily. My grandfather's people are there, and they can ensure Zachary's safety."

Emily sighed but eventually relented. "Alright, but please travel with your bodyguard."

Zachary nodded. "I will. Kristin, please make those arrangements as well."

The mood lightened once more as they moved on to other topics. Soon, the clock hit 4:00 PM, and the ladies said they had to leave. Emily would travel to England that night to start the final contract negotiations with Liverpool. As for Kristin, she would head to Abidjan to organize Zachary's schedule before his arrival.

Zachary smiled and gave them warm hugs. "Thank you both for everything. Safe travels."

As Emily and Kristin left the private booth, Zachary felt waves of satisfaction welling up like tides within him. He was on the verge of a significant career move, and his future seemed brighter than ever.

Returning to his hotel room, he eagerly picked up his sports manga, ready to lose himself in the world of fiction. The evening passed uneventfully, and Zachary enjoyed a quiet night's sleep.

Eventually, the morning light filtered through the curtains of his hotel room in Moscow, casting a golden glow on Zachary's face. He woke up with a start, the memory of their World Cup victory fresh in his mind.

The sense of accomplishment from winning the World Cup filled him with pride and anticipation for the return journey to Africa. He stretched and yawned, feeling rejuvenated thanks to the system's vitality-enhancing elixirs. It was as if the exhaustion from the grueling World Cup final had never existed.

Zachary quickly showered and donned his Ivorian tracksuit. At precisely 6:00 AM, he retrieved his World Cup medal, Golden Boot, and Golden Ball from the hotel safe. With his awards finally in his hands, he joined his Ivorian teammates for an early breakfast in the hotel dining room.

The atmosphere was a mix of fatigue and exhilaration. Players exchanged stories and laughter over plates filled with eggs, toast, and fresh fruit. The glistening World Cup medals around their necks added something unique to their auras and an extra sparkle to the morning.

As Zachary entered, the players whistled and cheered. Some stood up and jokingly offered to help him carry his awards. Zachary grinned and held his trophies close, like a kid guarding his candy from potential thieves. The room erupted in laughter, and the mood around the team soared.

Coach Hervé Renard stood up, clinking his glass to get their attention. "Gentlemen, I just want to say once more how proud I am of each and every one of you. Your discipline, commitment, and hard work have paid off. Today, we return to your homeland, and now also my homeland as champions. Enjoy this moment, for it is one you will cherish forever."

The team erupted in applause and cheers. Sylvain Gbohouo, the Ivorian goalkeeper, nudged Zachary with a grin. "Ready for the parade, Zachary?"

Zachary was already picturing the jubilant crowds in Abidjan, the endless speeches, and the time-consuming celebrations. Finding a quiet spot to continue reading his sports manga seemed a more attractive option if he could have his way. "Honestly, I find such public events more unnerving than preparing for a World Cup final. But I'll try my best to keep calm and have fun."

Gbohouo chuckled. "These celebrations are what we play for, my friend. Enjoy them."

Zachary smiled. "I'll try."

By 6:45 AM, they had checked out of the hotel and boarded the team bus. As they sped towards Sheremetyevo International Airport, the city of Moscow blurred past the windows, a backdrop to their thoughts of homecoming.

The bus was filled with a mix of excitement and reflection. Each player was lost in their thoughts, cherishing the memories of their historic win.

When they finally arrived at the airport, they were surprised to find a flurry of activity. Fans and media personnel from Russia and the rest of Europe crowded around, eager to catch a glimpse of the World Cup champions.

Zachary and his teammates navigated through the organized chaos with a sense of purpose, their presence commanding the attention of everyone around them.

As they moved through security and airport procedures, Zachary couldn't help but smile at the sight of younger fans calling out his name. One particularly enthusiastic boy caught his eye, waving a shirt and a marker in his direction.

Zachary quickly broke away from the team, bent down, and signed his name on the boy's shirt, earning an ear-to-ear grin from the young fan.

As he rejoined his teammates, Eric Bailly turned back, a playful glint in his eye. "Zachary, you're a superstar even in Putin's land!" he teased.

Zachary chuckled, shaking his head. "Guess I'll need a few more bodyguards soon."

The mood around the team remained hyper as they continued through the terminal, causing quite a stir. By the time they reached the private chartered plane waiting on the tarmac, the airport had practically come to a standstill, all eyes on the triumphant Ivorian squad.

At 7:30 AM, the plane's wheels lifted off the ground, and they were airborne, bound for Ivory Coast. The flight was a serene contrast to the chaotic excitement that awaited them.

Most players succumbed to the exhaustion of their World Cup journey, dozing off in their seats. Others, like Zachary and Zaha, relaxed with movies or music, their minds oscillating between the euphoric memories of the final and the anticipation of their homecoming.

Eventually, the plane finally descended towards Félix-Houphouët-Boigny International Airport around 1:00 PM Abidjan time, and the cabin buzzed with palpable excitement.

Players stirred awake, exchanging eager looks and wide grins. They straightened their orange tracksuits and ran combs through their hair, preparing for the cameras that would soon capture their triumphant return.

The moment the plane touched down smoothly, a cheer erupted from the players. They were home. They were back on African soil. As the cabin door opened, the warm, humid air typical of Abidjan filled the plane, enveloping the team in a familiar embrace.

Coach Hervé Renard and his assistants were the first to disembark, followed by Gervinho, who carried the World Cup trophy high, his smile as bright as the African sun.

Zachary followed, stepping onto the tarmac and into a hero's welcome with his accolades in hand. The airport was lined with military personnel and dignitaries, their faces beaming with pride. Beyond the barriers, the crowd's roar was deafening, a wave of national pride and joy.

Ivory Coast had waited for this moment, and now it had arrived.

A convoy of vehicles awaited them, ready to transport the team through the streets of Abidjan. As they boarded the open-top buses, the players were handed Ivorian flags, which they waved enthusiastically.

Chapter 670 Abidjan Celebrates

670 Abidjan Celebrates

The convoy set off, and the city erupted in celebration. The streets were a sea of orange, white, and green—the national colors. Music filled the air, a perfect mix of traditional rhythms and modern beats that mirrored the nation's blend of heritage and progress.

Zachary stood at the edge of the bus, laughing as he saw his compatriots celebrating their victory like mad. But on the inside, he felt a mix of emotions. He hadn't grown up in Ivory Coast, having switched citizenship when he was already a professional footballer. Nevertheless, the enthusiastic cheers of the crowd made him feel at home.

As the convoy moved through the city, they passed iconic landmarks—the St. Paul's Cathedral, the bustling markets, and the majestic Presidential Palace. Each stop was met with more jubilant crowds, their cheers echoing the team's achievements.

The convoy finally arrived at the National Stadium, where a grand ceremony had been organized. The stands were filled with thousands of fans, their excitement palpable. A stage had been set up at the center of the field, adorned with flags and banners celebrating the team's victory.

President Alassane Ouattara, accompanied by other dignitaries and representatives from the Ivorian Football Federation, stood ready to welcome the team, a broad smile on their faces. But today, he and

the other big potatoes were not the main attraction. They were just the ashers welcoming the return of the country's triumphant warriors.

The players finally disembarked and made their way to the stage, and the crowd's cheers reached a fever pitch. Gervinho stepped forward, holding the World Cup trophy high above his head, and the stadium erupted in explosive applause. The cheers seemed to shake the very foundation of the stadium.

After several minutes, President Ouattara raised his hand, and the crowd gradually quieted down. His voice carried over the noise of the crowd with the help of the speakers as he began his speech.

"Today, we celebrate not just a victory in football—but a victory for our nation," he declared. "Our team has triumphed over everyone else in Russia and brought the World Cup trophy home. They have shown the world the strength, resilience, and unity of Ivory Coast. We are proud of each and every one of these players."

The players took their seats, their expressions a mix of pride and humility. Zachary, though a bit bored by the speeches, used his experience from high school math lessons to stay alert.

The crowd erupted again, but the president's raised hand commanded attention, bringing them back to silence. "We will provide each player with a significant monetary reward, acknowledging their dedication and hard work. In our country's National Order of Merit, team officials will also be awarded the rank of Commander, while the coaches and players will be named Chevalier and officers.

"Additionally, we will offer them prime real estate in Abidjan, ensuring they have a place to call home in our beautiful capital. And when they finally retire from their football careers, we will also grant them honorary titles and positions within the sports ministry and other relevant departments, hoping they will continue fostering football talent in our country."

Zachary felt a swell of pride. These rewards were not just symbols of gratitude but also a commitment to the future of football in Ivory Coast. He hoped that this gesture would trigger more African countries to do the same, and just maybe, African sports would then prosper.

In the meantime, the president continued, detailing plans to build new sports facilities and academies, ensuring the nation's youth had the resources to pursue their dreams. He also routinely praised the footballers, making them feel appreciated.

Later on, as the ceremony concluded, the players mingled with the dignitaries and fans, the atmosphere one of joy and celebration. Zachary felt a sense of belonging he hadn't expected. Despite his complicated feelings about his nationality, the love and pride radiating from the crowd made him feel at home.

The sun finally set over Abidjan, casting a warm, golden hue upon the stadium. The president and other dignitaries departed with their security details, but the celebrations showed no signs of slowing down.

Local musicians took the stage, rousing the crowds with electrifying performances. They even called some footballers to join them, and the players eagerly accepted, dancing and singing with the exuberant fans.

Zachary watched the unfolding chaos with a smile, but as the situation turned more disorderly, he decided it was time to leave. He sent a quick message to Kristin, then said his goodbyes to his teammates. They tried to tempt him to stay for the night's celebrations, promising him a tour of Abidjan's famous nightlife.

"Come on, Zach! You've got to see the city at night," Eric Bailly urged, laughing.

But Zachary remained unmoved. "Thanks, guys, but I need some rest. There's still a lot ahead of us," he replied with a smile, politely declining the invitations.

He made his way towards the stadium exit. The fans went wild, calling out his name and trying to get near him. But the military personnel were efficient, keeping the excited crowd at bay. Finally, after some struggle, Zachary exited the stadium, flanked by his escorts.

He soon spotted Kristin and Lorenzo Riccardo, his bodyguard, standing beside a sparkling white Toyota Land Cruiser V8. They waved, and Zachary quickly walked over to them, greeting them warmly.

"Congratulations again, Zachary!" Kristin said, her eyes shining with pride. "You're now a national hero."

"Thanks, Kristin. It's been an incredible day," Zachary replied.

Without wasting time, he climbed into the back seat of the SUV. Lorenzo took the driver's seat while Kristin sat in the passenger seat, and they set off, still under military escort, to one of Zachary's properties in Abidjan.

As they left the stadium behind, Zachary looked out the window, watching the jubilant crowds celebrating in the streets. The vibrant energy was contagious, but he was glad to head towards a quiet refuge. He needed to clear his mind and plan his next moves.

"So, what's the plan now?" Kristin asked, turning in her seat to face him.

Zachary sighed, leaning back. "Rest, for starters. Then, we'll need to finalize the move to Liverpool. You know that Emily's already working on the contract details."

Kristin nodded. "I've arranged everything for your trip to Bukavu after we're done here. The private plane will be ready when you are."

"Thank you, Kristin. I appreciate everything you're doing for me," Zachary said, his voice sincere.

They soon arrived at Zachary's property, a modest but comfortable house on the outskirts of Abidjan. The military escort ensured everything was secure before taking positions around the place to ensure they remained undisturbed throughout the night.

Zachary entered the house, feeling a wave of relief wash over him. It was quiet, a stark contrast to the noise and excitement of the day. He went to his room, showered, changed into comfortable clothes, and collapsed onto the bed.

As he lay there, he thought about the journey ahead. Winning the World Cup was a dream come true. But he knew it was just one step in his career as there were more challenges to face before he could achieve pure transcendence in football and maybe become the GOAT.

He drifted off to sleep with a smile, dreaming of a beautiful future filled with possibilities of greatness. Tomorrow, he would rest and recover. After some resetting, he would prepare for his move to Liverpool and the next chapter of his incredible journey.

