

THE GREATEST OF ALL TIME

Chapter 12 - The Crucial Day III

"Are you going back on the field too?" Luyinda asked once Zachary approached him. He had just finished his chat with the other coach. They were standing on the touchline, waiting to re-enter the pitch.

"What do you think?" Zachary asked, the corner of his mouth lifting. Findd new stories on [nov/e\(l\)bin\(.\)com](http://nov/e(l)bin(.)com)

"Shit," Luyinda cursed. "I can't believe I'm stuck with you today of all days," he snorted.

"Why were you isolating me during the game?" Zachary asked directly, locking eyes with the defensive midfielder. He wanted to resolve the conflict between them before they rejoined the match.

"Eh!" Surprise registered on Luyinda's face. It seemed he hadn't expected that question.

"I asked," Zachary emphasized. "Why were you not passing to me during the first half? We are in a trial match, not some backyard soccer."

"You were not creating any space to receive the passes," Luyinda stammered, taking a few steps away from Zachary.

"Seriously. What about that time when I was on your left with no green players around?" Zachary pointed out. He had been creating space for himself to receive the ball, but Luyinda always opted for long balls that cost the red team possession.

"Okay, okay.

Stop bothering me." Luyinda gibbered. He looked around to see if any of the coaches were looking at them. He surrendered when he noticed that Coach Damata's attention was on them.

"I'll pass to you when we are back in. But this doesn't mean we're friends. God! I hope this is the last time we play on the same team." He whispered.

[What did I ever do to him?] Zachary wondered but said, "Suit yourself. As long as you pass me the ball, everything will be fine. Remember, we have less than twenty minutes to turn this around." He emphasized.

Luyinda did not reply. He continued silently observing the match.

Zachary did not bother him anymore. His main goal was to impress scouts not making friends.

A minute later, Coach Mande blew the whistle and invited them back into the pitch.

"Luyinda," Zachary called out to the number-6. "Don't forget your promise," he intoned before jogging confidently into the pitch. Luyinda nodded and followed.

"You're back," Kasongo ran to him excitedly as soon as he positioned himself in the center circle.

"Kasongo," Zachary bumped fists with the short winger. "We need to win this game to have any chance of impressing the scouts. So, be sharp. Go back to your number and wait for my passes."

"Okay," Kasongo replied and ran back to the right-wing. He could see the seriousness on Zachary's face and simply did as instructed.

Zachary started observing the positioning of every player on the pitch. The body language of both his opponents and teammates was captured in great detail in his mind.

Samuel Baraka, the goalkeeper of the red team, was still fetching the ball to restart gameplay. The ball had gone outside after Kayembe missed a shot on goal.

In the other half, he noticed that the face of Emanuel Luboya, his team's striker, still glinted with a hunger for the game. He was eagerly waiting for the ball deep in the green team's half. The striker hadn't given up yet. Zachary was relieved.

For the first time that day, he noted that there were gaps in the opponent's formation. He could see a lot of space between the green team's midfield and defenders that could potentially be exploited by his team. His A+ spatial awareness was already doing wonders.

[The opponents have relaxed. Let's play.] Zachary smiled. He turned around to receive the ball from the goalkeeper.

Baraka quickly took the goal kick. He whipped the ball towards Beni Badibanga deep in the green team's half. Nike Kabanga, the number-5 of the green team, jumped high in the air and headed the ball back to the other half. He had won a header against Beni, the number-9 in red, once again.

Luyinda controlled the ball on his chest and immediately passed it to Zachary without even looking up.

Zachary sighed in relief when he saw the ball rolling towards him. He was more confident as his isolation from his teammates seemed to have come to an end.

He controlled the ball beautifully with his left foot before turning and dashing towards the green team's half. He had already lost Francis Wagaluka, the player responsible for marking him. He had a few yards to run freely with the ball since no one was close to him.

Zachary sprinted at his fastest speed and penetrated deep into the opponent's half in just seconds. As he moved with the ball, he looked towards Emanuel Luboya, the center forward, dashing towards the right side of the opponent's 18-yard-box. He seemed to be drawing the attention of the defenders in green away from Beni on the right.

On looking closer, Zachary noticed two shadows flash out of the striker's body. One continued running towards the right side of the goal while the second headed to the left. Zachary was perplexed.

However, he had no time to deliberate so he quickly whipped the ball towards the second shadow that had rushed out of the tall striker towards the left. That was the space the center-backs in green had neglected. Both Nike Kabanga and Samba Farouk were marking Beni Babidanga tightly on the right side.

Zachary hoped the forwards would interpret his intentions and make use of the pass. He knew this had a low chance of happening since the strikers had never trained or played with him until that day.

But surprisingly, he noticed that Emanuel Luboya had diverted his running route the moment Zachary released the looped pass over the defenders. Luboya sprinted with great vigor towards the left side of the goal. He followed in the exact footsteps of the shadow that had appeared to flash out of his body.

The striker collected the pass inside the box and unleashed a shot that was brilliantly blocked by an outstretched leg of Jackson Lunanga, the goalkeeper. The referee signaled to the corner flag.

The red team had earned their first attempt on goal for the day. Luboya was holding his head between his hands in regret at having missed a goal-scoring opportunity.

[The shadows rushing out of Luboya must have been a manifestation of the Zinedine-Visual-Juju.] Zachary speculated.

"That was a good ball," Lunanga commented as Zachary arrived in the green team's penalty box to attack the corner ball.

"Don't worry about the missed opportunity," Zachary consoled the striker. "I'll send you more balls like those. Make sure you score." He smiled, patting the tall guy's back.

"I say you won't get any more opportunities to do anything. I'll be marking you." A new voice sounded from behind them. Zachary turned back only to find Mangala standing behind him, with arms akimbo. The shady smile on his pristine face made him appear all too arrogant, like a Casanova.

Zachary frowned but ignored the lanky boy. He didn't want a conflict with anyone else that day. He had already learned his lesson. The corner-kick that Kasongo was about to take was the only thing on his mind.

Suddenly, he had another vision.

A shadow in the shape of a ball came floating towards the box from the corner flag. It was headed away by a different shadow from one of the opposing players and split into three balls. Two of them zoomed towards the right and left sides, outside of the box. However, the last went right through the middle.

[Another Zinedine-Visual-Juju vision.]

Zachary was excited as he noticed that Kasongo was finally taking the corner.

He stealthily started moving away from Mangala who was marking him. When the ball was close to reaching its highest point, he dashed outside the eighteen-yard-box. He positioned himself before the arc and waited for the ball. He had put his chances on the ball shadow passing through the center in the Zinedine-Visual-Juju.

Mangala first frowned when he noticed his actions. However, he just smiled and ignored Zachary after seeing the floating ball from the corner. Kasongo had delivered an imprecise corner kick that was easily headed away by Wagaluka.

Zachary, stationed just outside the box, noticed the ball flying towards him.

[BINGO!] He thought. He had won the bet on where the ball would be heading.

He focused on the incoming ball and unleashed a missile of a shot towards the goal. He had caught the ball on the volley with the outside of his boot.

"BAM!"

The ball surprised everyone, including the goalkeeper. The long-range shot whooshed towards the top-right corner of the goalposts, unobstructed. 2:1. The red team had pulled one back.

The tables were beginning to turn.

Zachary did not celebrate his goal. He ran and picked the ball from the green team's net and returned it to the center circle of the pitch. Only fifteen minutes were remaining till the end of the match. He couldn't spare time for pointless celebrations. He would lose a lot if he didn't win this match.

Coach Mande blew the whistle and restarted the game.

For the next five minutes, the red team dominated the game. The return of Zachary and Luyinda had boosted their strength.

The two tackled, intercepted, and released passes to the strikers every few minutes. They were dominating the midfield.

Mangala tried to mark Zachary but failed. He was an agile player, used to running and dribbling past defenders. He couldn't manage a physical

confrontation in the midfield with Zachary who was tall and muscular. So, he returned to his number-9 position, defeated after a few minutes of trying.

On the other hand, Zachary continued seeing shadows flashing across the pitch every once in a while. Some came from balls and others from players. He had confirmed that they were manifestations of some sort of predictive ability granted by the Zinedine-Visual-Juju. They increased his spatial awareness whenever he passed and intercepted balls during the match. They had helped him trace the ball's trajectory when he scored the goal.

However, there were also chances of making a wrong prediction. Zachary had found this out after distributing a pass to Kasongo making a run into the box. The real Kasongo headed in a different direction and followed the route taken by another one of his shadows. This was the case even after factoring in the positioning of the opponents and his teammates.

In the twentieth minute of the second half, the green team managed to find their rhythm once again. Kayembe, the winger, delivered a teasing cross into the box of the red team.

The cross found Mangala, who controlled it well and lashed the ball towards the bottom right corner. Samuel Baraka, the goalkeeper, was alert and pulled off a brilliant diving save. Coach Mande blew his whistle and awarded the green team a corner kick.

Mangala and his teammates had a chance to widen the lead. All the players of the red team, including the strikers, rushed back to their box to defend. The green team's defenders followed them.

Zachary observed their actions before calling Kasongo over. He whispered a few instructions in his ear before dismissing him back to the edge of the box.

The keeper, Baraka, defended the corner ball that had come in low. He punched it towards the sidelines where Zachary had been waiting.

Zachary had successfully predicted where the ball would end up and moved into position in advance. He controlled the ball beautifully and sprinted off towards the opponent's half at his best speed. Francis Wagaluka came to intercept with a sliding tackle. Zachary skipped over it and passed the ball to Kasongo, running in sync with him through the middle of the pitch.

The counterattack was on.

Edo Kayembe used his swift pace to catch up with Kasongo and pulled on his shirt. He intended to commit a professional foul and stop the counterattack. However, Kasongo did not falter. He stayed firm on his feet until he hammered the ball towards Zachary, already into the opponent's half and close to the touchline. There were no players between him and the goalkeeper. All the defenders were still running from the opposite half.

Coach Mande, the referee, waved an advantage-play even after Kayembe pulled Kasongo to the ground.

Zachary produced a stunning solo run from the middle of the pitch to the penalty area. He lashed the ball into the bottom left corner, giving Jackson Lunanga, the keeper, no chance. Goal.

With eight minutes to go, the score was level at 2:2.

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"You were right, grandpa," Kristin begun. "Zachary is all over the pitch now. His ability to control the game and pass the ball is simply unmatched. Every scout will want a playmaker like him." Kristin commented dejectedly. She sighed while watching the players in red bibs celebrating quickly and rushing back to their half. They seemed eager to resume the match.

The grandpa remained silent with his eyes fixed on the pitch.

"Grandpa," Kristin crooned, pocking the old man's shoulder with her slender finger.

"I hear you, Kristin," the old man replied. He turned to face his granddaughter.

"We have to get him by all means," He intoned. "I'll talk to the coach who's a friend of mine. Don't worry."

"Why does your file say that he's more of a slow-paced player who's good at doing the team's dirty work," Kristin inquired, frowning. She opened the player file for the umpteenth time that day.

"You're asking me! Who should I ask?" The grandpa spread out his arms.

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