

THE GREATEST OF ALL TIME

Chapter 11 - The Crucial Day II

A few minutes to 9:00 am.

Coach Mande looked at his watch before signaling for the teams to take their positions. All the players on the pitch, including Zachary, were waiting for his whistle to kick-off the game. It was the moment of truth that would define their destinies. Everyone was tense.

Coach Mande had chosen the red-team to kick off the game. Emanuel Luboya and Beni Badibanga were already standing in the center circle next to the ball.

Most of the scouts had already begun abandoning their seats in the stands. They had started moving closer to the touchline to get a better view of the proceedings. Most were adjusting their cameras to face the field to capture the moments of the match.

Coach Mande looked at his watch again before looking towards Damata on the sideline. The latter nodded.

FWEEEEEEEE!

Kick-off!

Emanuel passed the ball to Beni Badibanga and rushed forward into the other half without looking back.

"Beni, pass here," Zachary called out to Beni after seeing him looking around for a teammate to pass the ball. He was unmarked and ready to receive the ball. The latter ignored him and kicked it towards Tony Majembe in the left-wing.

That was when Edo Kayembe, the right-winger of the team in green bibs, came sliding in with a tackle. He won the ball fair and square and instantly hammered it to Wagaluka Francis in the midfield.

Wagaluka beautifully controlled the ball and skipped past Beni who was already tightly marking him.

He looked up and kicked the ball high, sending a long pass towards the swift Stephen Mangala who was rushing towards the box in the red team's half.

Zachary and his teammates did not even react as Mangala received the ball just outside the 18-yard-box. Only Fredric Luamba stood between him and the goalkeeper.

Without looking up, he drilled a powerful shot towards the bottom left corner, forcing Samuel Baraka to pull off a brilliant save. The green team had a corner.

The red team was already under pressure due to Beni Badibanga's poor judgment in the first minute. He had chosen to pass to Tony, who was tightly marked by an opponent, instead of Zachary. As a result, the red team had lost the ball and almost conceded a goal.

"Beni," Zachary called out to the number-9. "Why did you not pass to me? He intoned as they ran back to their half to defend against the corner.

"Piss off," the striker scowled. "I'll play my game, and you play yours. Don't get in my way." He added before increasing his pace.

"Young kids." Zachary sighed.

The green team took the corner quickly, but nothing came of it.

For the next ten minutes, the game continued in favor of the green team. The boys in green dominated the midfield and had the majority of the ball possession.

Both Wagaluka and Paul-José Mpoku had already set Mangala loose three times in the red team's penalty box. Their deadly through balls could have easily turned into goals if not for the brilliant performance of Baraka, the goalkeeper.

Zachary already had a clear picture of what was wrong with his red team. His high game-intelligence enabled him to deduce that some of the players were choosing to isolate him. They were not giving him any passes. Since he was the midfielder responsible for building up all the attacks, his teammates' behavior was proving costly.

In his previous life, he had faced similar isolation during matches in soccer trials. Such matches were extremely competitive making it difficult for players to show off their skills. The main reason for this was the fact that players on the same team were still competing with each other. They all sought the attention of the scouts or coaches in attendance. Players would be less inclined to pass the ball to teammates who they viewed as competition. But what surprised Zachary was the appearance of such behavior in trials involving teenagers.

[Where is the spirit of sportsmanship?] He wondered.

His red team was already facing another attacking threat from Mangala and his green team. Zachary had resolved to move further back and counter the pressure mounted by the opponents.

But in the twenty-fifth minute of the first half, Chris Luyinda made a rough challenge on the ferocious Edo Kayembe at the right side out of the penalty box. Coach Mande blew his whistle for a foul and awarded a free-kick to the green team.

"What are all of you doing over there?" Luyinda shouted at his teammates.
"Put up a wall and defend."

The red team players did not mind Luyinda's rudeness and quietly put up a wall to defend the free-kick. Even Zachary, who had been denied any passes since the match began, joined the wall of players.

Coach Mande blew the whistle, signaling the green team to take the free-kick.

Edo Kayembe, the number-7, sent a superb cross into the box where Mangala was lurking. The boy prodigy latched on to it, and from around the penalty spot, he planted a header past Samuel Baraka. The ball bounced off the bottom of the left post before sliding into the back of the net. Mangala had displayed his eye for the goal.

The score was 1:0.

Zachary stood with his arms akimbo, watching the others. The red players all had dejected expressions with their shoulders slumped. He saw some of the scouts on the sidelines nodding to themselves as they eyed Mangala.

[So this is how Mangala got to Europe in my previous life.] Zachary sighed. He was sure that the boy would be recruited by one of the academies after the match. He was about to say some encouraging words to his teammates but was interrupted by Chris Luyinda.

"You useless joke of an attacking midfielder," he intoned, pointing his forefinger at Bemba. "They have taken over the whole midfield! What're you doing?" He queried.

"Our strikers don't have even a single chance at goal. Why are the coaches not substituting an idiot like you?" He continued.

"Watch it, man," Zachary intoned, moving closer to face off with Luyinda. "You haven't been passing the ball to me. What do you expect me to do?" He questioned angrily.

FWEEEEEE!

As their argument was beginning to pick up, Coach Mande blew his whistle.

"Anything the problem," he asked, running towards them.

"No." Both Zachary and Luyinda responded at the same time. They jumped away from each other like scared rabbits that had seen a lion.

"Both of you! Go to the bench and cool down." Coach Mande bellowed, creasing his brows. "Hurry up. We need to give a chance to those who take the trials seriously."

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"One has been substituted," Kristin observed as she placed down her camera. "Are you sure that Zachary is a talent? He has had zero impact on the match, so far!" She frowned.

"I beg to defer," the old man smiled, sitting back down. Unlike the other scouts who had moved to the tracks, they were still seated within the pavilion.

"Have you noticed that the other players on his team have been isolating him?" The grandpa asked.

"What has that got to do with anything?"

"In trial matches, players will only isolate their teammates in two scenarios," the grandpa opined. "One is when the player is too good and able to overshadow the others and reduce their chances of catching a scout's eye. The other is when the player lacks skills and will waste the team's chances."

"My dear Kristin," the grandpa smiled. "Under which category do you think Zachary falls?" He asked.

Kristin couldn't help but raise her camera to observe the player who was ambling dejectedly out of the pitch. He was a bit buff and tall for his age, close to five-nine by her estimations. *all new stories at [n0ve/lbi/n\(.\)com](http://n0ve/lbi/n(.)com)*

His crew-cut hair that was midnight black matched his dark brown eyes, framed by graceful dark brows. He had prominent cheekbones, a well-defined chin, and a nose that made him slightly handsome. His face was strong and defined, his features molded from granite. Kristin observed that his skin was a lighter shade of chocolate brown. She thought that he would grow up into a handsome man in the future. But could he also grow into a talented player? That was the question that occupied her mind.

"I can't tell at the moment," she replied. "I will evaluate Zachary's talent only when he performs on the pitch." She added, gently placing down her camera.

"We won't be able to snatch the Mangala boy from the French clubs," the old man stated. "They have deeper coffers than our tiny Norwegian clubs. So, we should start looking at the players they fail to notice."

"Like Zachary and Paul?" Kristin queried, opening the file once again.

"Yes, like them," the old man smiled. "It's good for us that Zachary isn't performing well. Otherwise, he would also be whisked away."

"You're an evil old man," Kristin jested, smiling.

"Gotta be to succeed in this business," the grandpa chortled before focusing on the match once again.

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Zachary's moved back to the sidelines with shoulders slumped and his eyes cast down in a mournful gaze. His mouth was set in a semi-pout. He imagined himself bashing the face of Luyinda when he replayed the moment when Coach Mande had sent him off the pitch. He felt distraught. There was nothing left to feel, nothing left to hope for, nothing left but the void that enveloped his mind in swirling blackness. Everything he had worked so hard to achieve was about to go up in smoke.

He dejectedly sat down on the sidelines.

[Why did I have to square off with Luyinda on such a day?]

[Why? Why?]

Before the match, he thought that he was already in perfect control of his emotions, unlike in his previous life. But he had easily flared up after a slight provocation from Luyinda.

He heard the sounds of cheering and raised his head only to find that the boy prodigy Mangala had just scored another goal. It was 2:0 just before half time.

"DING"

The system interface popped up by its self.

G.O.A.T MISSIONS

#NEW MISSION: Lubumbashi soccer trials (serial missions)

*Task 2: Help your red team clinch victory over the green team.

*Task 3: Catch the eye of a soccer academy official or a club scout.

*Rewards:

->Snooping tool to be unlocked (Will tell you everything about your opponent. Only related to soccer.)

*Punishment in case of failure:

->The G.O.A.T system will go offline for a year.

*Remarks: A G.O.A.T never gives up.

[What the F**k!?!]

"How does it expect me to achieve all this when I have already been suspended from the game?"

Zachary diverted his attention and wallowed in depression until the half-time whistle sounded. He stayed slumped on the sidelines until he was called over by Coach Damata minutes later.

"How're you feeling?" The coach asked when Zachary arrived by his side.

"Like I want to dive into the River Congo with a stone tied to my back," Zachary smiled ruefully.

"Hahaha," Damata laughed, attracting a few gazes from the scouts nearby.

"That is so subtle. You should never think like that. There are various paths one can take to achieve something." He advised.

Zachary nodded. He glanced towards the pitch and noticed that the second half had already started. The score was still 2:0.

But Zachary was sure that the red team would concede more goals very soon. The boys in green, especially Mangala, Kayembe, and Wagaluka, were too ferocious. They were still pressuring their opponents in red within their half. Their tiki-taka football was too fast for Kasongo and the others to compete.

"The red team players have lost all motivation," Coach Damata commented nonchalantly. "You and Luyinda are the major cause of this," he added.

"I'm sorry, coach," Zachary pleaded.

"You know that temperament is one of the most important attributes of a sportsman. You will get nowhere if you can't rain in your emotions." Damata lectured.

Zachary waited silently. He noticed that one of the other coaches was also talking to Luyinda.

[Will they allow us back in?] His mood lifted. He would perform his best even if he was given just some fifteen minutes of match time. He just wanted to leave without regrets.

The next words of the coach instantly kicked him out of hell into heaven.

"I'll be giving you one more chance to impress the scouts," Coach Damata smiled. "Due to your previous behavior, many of them will shun you. But you never know. There may be one among them who might like the way you play." He added.

"Thank you, coach, for the opportunity," he bowed ceremoniously.

"Talk with Luyinda first. You two are teammates now and also the best midfielders the red team has. If you don't sort out your issues, both of you will never succeed." The coach advised.

"Okay, Coach," he said meekly. To succeed, he would do anything. Talking to the idiot was just a minor inconvenience compared to losing everything.