

# THE GREATEST OF ALL TIME

## Chapter 14 - A Meeting With Scouts

"Stephen Mangala, Miché Mika, Edo Kayembe, and Samuel Baraka." Mr. Christophe Benard, the head scout of FC Nantes Youth Academy, closed his notebook. He had finished announcing the names of the four players selected for the French sports scholarship. "That'll be all. Good luck to the rest of you." He concluded.

"Eehh!" The rest of the players, including some of the coaches, exclaimed. They started stealing glances at Zachary who stood at the very back of the group. He had scored a hat-trick and played better than everyone else during the match. But, the scouts had left him out of the list of players heading to France.

However, everyone quickly forgot about the issue and returned their attention to Coach Damata who had returned to the center stage after the foreign scout left.

"Let's congratulate the four players who are leaving for France. They deserve to be applauded for their exceptional performance in today's game." Coach Damata intoned, smiling. He seemed to be in a good mood.

Most of the other players clapped half-heartedly. They were still lamenting the missed opportunity. However, a few had learned to accept rejection and failure. They were looking forward to the remaining days of the Lubumbashi trials. They still had the opportunity to impress scouts from the African teams looking for new talents.

"Okay people. That's the spirit." Coach Damata laughed. "I usually tell my students it is okay to fail. A lot of people are so afraid of failure that they skip

trials like these. They end up joining the camp of those that don't think themselves capable of succeeding as professional soccer players." He paused, letting his gaze roam over all the young men gathered before him.

"You should be aware that many people attain their greatest success, just after their greatest failure. Not getting selected is merely a bump in your football career. Every failure in life is a stepping stone to greater heights. I am most proud of the blessings that God has bestowed upon me as a coach. He has given me the vision to see that you can still get back on your feet after falling. That belief has kept me going as a coach all my years." *Rread latest chapters at [n/ov\(e\)lbin\(.\)co/m](http://n/ov(e)lbin(.)co/m)*

"Will you lose all hope of achieving your dreams and join the failures after not being selected?" He asked. "Or, will you continue to pursue your dreams with newfound vigor after this momentary setback?"

Most of the young players responded positively to the inspirational words of the coach. They all longed to join professional teams and play soccer. Soccer was the only refuge in their war-torn nation.

The few that had looked dejected seemed to have gotten a new lease on life after hearing the coach's speech. They all had a glint in their eyes that indicated they had not given up.

"Then, I'm relieved." Coach Damata smiled. "You're dismissed for today. Come back tomorrow to continue the trials."

"Just remember, never give up."

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Zachary remained standing at the back of the group even when the other players started dispersing. His world collapsed when the French scout announced the results. Pain circulated through his mind like waves on frigid sand.

[Why wasn't I selected? Was it because of my outburst during the first half?]

Several questions ran through his mind as he attempted to make sense of the scouts' decision. He could feel the eyes of the departing players on him. Some of them had pitiful expressions, whereas others looked on with mockery like their situation was any better. They seemed to have forgotten that they, too, had not been selected.

"Young man," he heard someone calling him from the side in a classic French accent that didn't belong in Africa. He turned around to find the head scout smiling at him.

"You're Zachary. Right?" Mr. Christophe Benard asked.

"Yes, that's me, sir," Zachary replied. He had no idea why the scout was initiating a conversation with him after leaving him out of the selection.

Zachary felt like punching the Frenchman in the face to relieve his mounting stress. However, he calmed himself after considering the repercussions. He didn't want to be blacklisted by all the scouts of the academies partaking in the Lubumbashi trials.

"I'll do you a favor, young man," the scout began solemnly. "With your injured foot, you'll never make it among the pros. Just give up and find something else to do before you injure yourself again. I hate to see a young man wallow in despair after investing all his time where he'll never succeed."

[Injured foot? Give up? Is this the reason for my not being on the list?]

Zachary started connecting the dots. His mood lifted. His greatest fear had been being blacklisted by the international scouts due to his unsportsmanlike behavior in the first half. But the French teams only left him out due to a supposed injury. He couldn't help but smile ruefully.

"I have said all that can be said. Take care." Mr. Benard moved away and disappeared into the mass of scouts leaving the stadium.

[Did he come to tell me just that? What a busy buddy.] He scoffed.

"Zach!" Kasongo's voice called out to him. "What did he want? Were you selected?"

"No. Just telling me to give up on soccer." Zachary smiled, turning towards his new friend.

"Say what? Why?"

"He thinks I'm injured."

"Are you?" Kasongo frowned.

"Not at all. I'm as fit as a fiddle." Zachary smirked.

"Then ignore the idiot." Kasongo smiled, patting his shoulder. "We still have a chance tomorrow. I heard that scouts from Raja Casablanca and Orlando Pirates are also part of the delegation. So, don't worry. We'll be selected."

"I know." Zachary nodded. From the memories of his past life, he knew the Lubumbashi trials were far from over. A few more players would get a chance to join other foreign academies over the following few days. He simply had to perform his best to join their ranks.

"Are you really okay?" Kasongo asked after seeing him spacing out.

"I'm fine." Zachary sighed. He still felt some dejection at being overlooked. However, he understood he had to move on and prepare for the continuation of the trials the following day.

"Let's go. I'll help you select a hotel today."

"Great." Kasongo laughed, jumping up like a little kid. "I'll buy lunch," he said, patting Zachary's back.

They started trekking towards the gate of the stadium but were stopped by Coach Damata along the way.

"Thank God. I managed to catch up to you." The coach smiled as he approached them. He seemed to have run up to them since he was panting.

"I have good news," he said without giving them a chance to reply. "Kasongo, head over to Coach Mande. He'll explain a few things to you. Zachary, come with me. I want you to meet someone."

"I am guessing that one of the scouts must have taken a liking to you," Kasongo whispered before running away towards the pavilion.

"Oh." Zachary was excited. Hope bloomed inside him. He turned and followed the coach into the tunnel that led to the dressing rooms of the stadium.

They went through the dimly lit passage and reached Coach Damata's office at the far end of a corridor. The coach pushed the door open and invited him in.

On one of the wooden benches within, an aged man and a young blond girl sat, waiting quietly.

Zachary ignored the old fella. He couldn't take his eyes off the girl holding a camera from the moment he entered the office.

He had initially noticed the girl before the match as the delegation of scouts entered the stadium. He didn't pay much attention to her then since she seemed like one of those 'flat as a pancake' types.

But up close, she looked like one of those models with an hour-glass figure often seen in Telemundo soap operas. Her straight blonde hair plunged over her slender shoulders, making her look like a vogue-magazine cut-out dropped onto the streets of Lubumbashi.

"Hey, Zach? Nice to meet you." She stood up and walked up to him, extending a manicured hand. Her amber-brown eyes gazed playfully at him.

They made his heart race like an inexperienced teenager that had met his crush for the first time.

Zachary had to drop his gaze in defeat before his mind was overtaken by inappropriate thoughts. His usual swagger, gained in his past life, had fled faster than a gambler from a bookie.

"Hey," Zachary stammered as he fumbled to take the slender hand of the girl. He realized he had taken too long to return her greeting. He looked at the floor to evade her gaze.

The old man suddenly cleared his throat to end the awkward situation. "I'm Martin Stein. This here is my granddaughter Kristin Stein. She's a scout in training. Nice to meet you." He also extended a hand towards Zachary for a handshake.

"Nice to meet you too." Zachary took the opportunity to escape and returned the salutation.

After exchanging greetings with the pair, he turned to Coach Damata for an explanation. He was beginning to grow tense under the scrutiny of the foreigners present in the office.

"These are scouts from the Norwegian Club Rosenborg BK," Coach Damata began. "They are interested in recruiting you into one of the academies affiliated with them. Are you interested?" He smiled.

"Of course, I'm interested." Zachary was quick to answer. He would never pass up the chance to join a high-performance academy in Europe. As long as he was there, he could find a way to enter the European football system. Moreover, Rosenborg was one of the best teams in Norway and had a proper youth training system. They had even participated in European championships, playing against top teams like Chelsea and Valencia. He remembered betting some of their matches during his previous life.

"Hahaha, that's great. I like straightforward young men like you. And, it's good you speak perfect English, unlike most people here in the Congo. You'll find it easy to adapt to life in Norway." Mr. Stein laughed, taking off his sunhat. His deep wrinkles seemed to carve a map of his life on his still agile facial features. His bright blue eyes, framed by thick white eyebrows, glittered in the dim light along with his perfect set of dazzling teeth.

"Mr. Damata," he turned towards the coach, still standing by the door. "I would like to conclude this business before the end of today. Can you initiate the talent transfer procedures from Congo to Norway right away?"

"I can," Coach Damata replied, smiling. "But we need to engage Zachary's parents to kick-start the process."

[Parents?] Zachary's heart vibrated like a church drum in his chest.

"Oh, that's is understandable." Mr. Stein frowned. "Seems we won't conclude everything today. I even wanted to take him for a medical before we complete the transfer."

"We can still conclude if we manage to get in touch with the parents within two hours," Coach Damata assured before turning towards Zachary.

"Zach, can you contact your parents right away? We need them to sign the consent forms allowing you to travel to Norway."

Zachary sighed before replying, "I don't have any parents. I've been living with my grandma in Bukavu for as long as I can remember."

The other three in the room remained quiet after hearing Zachary's declaration. They regarded him with pity like he was a street kid. Zachary didn't like their stares.

"Oh," Coach Damata was fast to recover. "Can you get in touch with her? I mean your grandma." He asked, patting Zachary's shoulder.

"We both don't have phones," Zachary stated. "But, I can try getting in touch with a doctor who's our neighbor. Through him, we might reach her by the end of tomorrow." He sighed, beginning to regret not buying a pair of cheap phones for himself and his grandma.

The others in the room were rendered speechless for a few seconds by his statement. Kristin especially looked surprised by Zachary's circumstances.

"Don't worry about that," Coach Damata said confidently. "I'll help you complete the paperwork before the end of tomorrow." He patted Zachary's shoulder.