

THE GREATEST OF ALL TIME

Chapter 9 - Talent Upgrade

After being dismissed by Coach Damata, Zachary exited the stadium and trekked northwards to downtown Lubumbashi.

The road ahead of him shimmered in the heat of the afternoon sun. The oppressive heat beat down on his head like he was bacon under a grill.

Suddenly, the after-effects of the race washed over him. He felt lightheaded. His knees began aching, threatening to buckle. He felt like his brain was on a five percent battery. All he wanted was to rest and soak in the calm peace of nature.

He decided to hire a motorbike back to his motel. That tapped further into his dwindling finances. However, his state of destitution didn't sour his mood. His fate was altering. If all went as planned, he would be swimming in dollars in only a few years.

A few minutes later, Zachary leisurely walked to the public bathrooms of his motel. He felt that only a cold shower could soothe his tender muscles.

The dirty bathroom and cold water were the best he could get with his meager funds. The pipes screeched like a ghost in a horror movie before spitting out a dribble of cold water. Zachary braced himself to prevent himself from reflexively jumping out of the stream before he'd finished soaping and rinsing his body.

The water poured down and dripped to the floor. As his mind faded into dullness, everything became a foggy illusion. He felt like he was standing underneath an everlasting waterfall. The sensation of the cold water calmed

him, making him reminisce about events from his past life. Find *new updates* on [n\(o\)v\(e\)lbin\(.\)com](http://n(o)v(e)lbin(.)com)

[What could she be doing now?]

Images of a beautiful girl that had come close to becoming his wife flooded his mind. He had dated Anita for more than two years. He was about to propose to her when his life got turned upside down. The moment his contract with TP Mazembe got terminated, the girl up and disappeared. He had failed to trace her whereabouts even during his later years.

[I need to make time and head to Kinshasha to see her.] Zachary resolved. He needed to gaze at her one last time before returning his attention to his career.

Zachary exited the shower and headed back to his motel room. He felt refreshed and ate a light lunch before sleeping off his fatigue until evening.

He felt rejuvenated after waking up. He was physically ready to take the elixir. So, he opened the system user interface.

A card with an image of a fresh onion appeared on the translucent blue screen when he clicked on the temporarily-unlocked system-inventory tab.

Once he selected it, a small onion popped out of the screen. He wasted no time in tossing it into his mouth.

This time around, the B-grade elixir did not cause his body any pain. He only felt a slightly ticklish sensation, like he was under the ministrations of a massage therapist. But soon, the feeling passed as if it had never been there.

[Is that all?]

His experience with the vitality enhancing elixir was a far cry from the agility one. The former brought great pain while the latter caused only a slightly ticklish sensation.

Zachary doubted whether the elixir had been effective.

He clenched and unclenched his hands to see whether anything changed. However, there seemed to be no way of checking. He had no idea how raising his agility would affect him. So, he opened the system user interface to peruse through his attributes.

SOCCER G.O.A.T SYSTEM

SYSTEM LEVEL: 1 (17/100 juju points to level-up)

USER: Zachary Bemba

AGE: 15 years

TALENT ASSESSMENT: Grade-B

JUJU-POINTS: 17

(Evaluation: A slightly talented pitiful boy dreaming about playing on the pro soccer scene)

USER MENU

*USER STATS

*G.O.A.T MISSIONS

*SYSTEM SHOP (temporarily-unlocked)

*SYSTEM LOTTERY (locked)

*SNOOPING TOOL (locked)

NB: Pls level-up the system to unlock more functions.

"Yes," Zachary yelled excitedly after perusing through the home page. His talent assessment had finally broken through to the B grading after more than a month of toiling. He tapped on the user-stats tab to see the breakdown of the changes in his attributes.

*USER STATS

- >Physical Fitness: B +
- >Soccer Technique: A -
- >Game Intelligence: A +
- >Mental Ability and Mindset: C -
- >X-Factors: F
- >G.O.A.T Skills: 1

Zachary's physical-fitness and soccer-technique stats had all increased by a single grade. He clicked on the soccer technique tab next.

USER STATS

- >Soccer-Technique (Av. Rating: A -)
- Ball Control: A +
- Dribbling skills: B -
- Passing accuracy: A -
- Body control: B +

Preferred foot: (Left and Right)

He had expected such a result. A player who improved his agility would also enhance both his dribbling skills and body control. The two attributes had improved by a grade after his consumption of the agility-enhancing-elixir. However, he couldn't understand why his physical-fitness hadn't leaped to the A- grade. The elixir was B-grade but had only caused minor changes in his physical fitness. So, he tapped on the physical-fitness tab to gain a better understanding of the changes in his body.

->Physical Fitness (Av. Rating: B +)

Balance and Coordination: B -

Agility: B +

Strength: B -

Stamina: B +

Endurance Points: 3500/ 5500 (A -)

"My stamina has dropped!" Zachary exclaimed. He noticed that his stamina had fallen from the A- to the B+ grading.

He was perplexed.

[Maybe agility enhancement directly reduces stamina.]

His agility had leaped from the D+ to the B+ grading. Consuming the elixir also enhanced his balance-and-coordination from the C+ to the B- grading.

He was now confident he would excel during the trial matches tomorrow.

But before he could soak in the feeling of jubilation at improving his abilities, a wave of hunger washed over him. His stomach growled and rumbled. He couldn't think of anything but food.

"Is this a side effect of the elixir?" He mumbled while patting his tammy. He glanced at his Asahi-watch; it was still six o'clock in the evening.

Zachary cleaned up and dashed out of his room to fill up his belly. He was critically short of money and decided to head to a roadside food stall nearby. He had already resorted to meals consisting solely of pancakes and fried cassava.

But as he stepped out of the motel, he bumped into Paul Kasongo, the strange boy that had also been selected for the trials happening the following day.

"You're Zachary Bemba? Right?" Kasongo asked, grinning.

"Yes, that's me," Zachary replied, creasing his brows. "Are you staying in a nearby motel? Why are you here?"

Paul Kasongo was fated to be murdered by a prostitute at the end of that week. According to the memories of his previous life, the unfortunate incident would take place in a Lubumbashi motel room.

"Hahaha," Kasongo laughed heartily. "I'm here to visit a friend that works around here. Why would I stay in such a dump?"

"You're not?" Zachary breathed out a sigh of relief. He only had to ensure that Kasongo stayed out of motels in downtown Lubumbashi to prevent his murder.

"I'm staying at the Hollybum Planet Hotel at Kilele Avenue," Kasongo replied, smiling.

"What the fuck!" Zachary exclaimed. "You're that rich?"

Hollybum Planet was a hotel for filthy rich Congolese and tourists from first world countries like France. He had heard that a single night's stay cost upwards of 150 US Dollars.

To his surprise, a boy about his age was staying comfortably in it. Zachary sighed at the unfairness of the world. He couldn't help but gaze back at his shabby motel.

"What can I say? I was born blessed." Kasongo spread out his arms like he was hugging the sky.

"I'm glad to make your acquaintance," he said, extending his arm.

Zachary shook it before nodding.

He observed the would-be murder victim more closely.

Kasongo was almost half a foot shorter than himself. He looked to be only around five-two. He vaguely resembled a younger Raheem Sterling, the famous player who would join Manchester City in the future. He had humorous brown eyes, round cheeks, a long face, and a dark-skin shade.

"I feel like fate made us meet here," Kasongo intoned, voice mellow. "Come on. I'll buy you dinner today." He added, patting Zachary's back.

"I've already eaten," Zachary lied. He didn't want to begin relying on rich kids for his meals. That would go against the teachings of his grandma. He resented charity from strangers.

However, his honest stomach betrayed him. It suddenly snarled and howled. A not-so-subtle undertone of pain followed. It came in waves, making him feel like his insides were digesting themselves.

Zachary clutched at his belly, pulling it this way and that in an attempt to silence it. All his efforts were fruitless. The sounds only grew louder, earning him a few curious glances from Kasongo and passers-by.

"Man," Kasongo creased a brow. "When did you last have a sensible meal?" He asked.

"At lunchtime," Zachary replied honestly. He was certain the hunger and pain were an after-effect of the agility-enhancing-elixir. It seemed to have burnt through all his stored energy reserves. He urgently needed to replenish them.

"Don't be a sissy, man," Kasongo intoned. "Just tag along and have some food. You'll mess up in the trials tomorrow if you go on like this."

Zachary agreed reluctantly.

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Half an hour later, Zachary and Kasongo sat at a table covered with a multitude of exquisite dishes.

They had traveled to the Lubumbashi Food Plaza, a classy restaurant that served exotic cuisine. It had large mullioned windows, long embroidered curtains, a flagstone tiled floor, and dark walnut tables, each with a vase of flowers as a centerpiece. Soothing Lingala music was playing live.

It was the sort of place that required making a reservation a week in advance. It was virtually impossible to get a table on demand. However, Kasongo did succeed at reserving a table on short notice.

A few moments after Zachary had slid into his chair and made his order, a beautiful waitress brought him an enormous platter of food. Eggs, all kinds of meat, and crispy fried potatoes lay before him. A tureen of fruit had been placed in ice to keep it chilled next to them. The basket of rolls they brought

as an afterthought could keep his family going for a week. He also had a glass of fruity cocktail juice.

[Even with my experience from two lives, I can't come to terms with the existence of this side of DR Congo.]

He sighed at the unfairness of the world.

Many were starving in the downtown of Lubumbashi while the rich stuffed themselves with delicacies. However, he was not depressed since he had come to understand the ways of society.

[A man has to work hard and make it or die trying.]

He continued stuffing himself with food like there was no tomorrow. The elixir had done a number on him. It would take a lot to sate his hunger. Zachary only stopped eating after his second helping. Kasongo gave him enough time to finish eating before starting a conversation.

"So, you're from Bukavu?" Kasongo asked.

"Yes," Zachary replied, wiping his mouth with a napkin. "Before I forget, thanks for the meal," he added.

"Small matter, small matter." Kasongo grinned.

"So, where are you from?" Zachary inquired. "I haven't seen you in any Lubumbashi youth soccer competitions."

"Hehehe," Kasongo laughed. "I'm a son of Kinshasha. I used to be a teammate of your competitor Stephen Mangala."

"You really took us for a ride in that race," he added. "You and Mangala are monsters. How do you guys train your stamina?" He asked, gazing curiously at Zachary.

"Well, I run five miles every day," he answered. "You should try it too. It could help."

"Why are you in these trials?" Zachary quickly asked. He was looking for some hints on what led to Kasongo's murder in his previous life.

"What do you mean?"

"I can tell your financial situation is quite good. You're living in a four-star hotel. You're even wearing timberland boots that probably cost more than my school fees. Why don't you tell your parents to enroll you in the soccer academies abroad instead? It would be much easier to develop yourself there. Why join the Lubumbashi trials?"

Kasongo frowned noticeably before replying.

"My father doesn't want me to play soccer," he grumbled. "He says it's a waste of time. He's always talking about how the majority of Congolese soccer players in the local league waste away after retirement."

"Oh, but that's true," Zachary replied. "So, you came here without his permission? Where did you get the money to spend in Lubumbashi?"

"My stepbrother sponsored my trip here. He's the only one who knows I'm taking part in the trials."

"He's much older and already joined my dad's mining company. At least, he understands that a person should only do what they love."

[What a naive boy. Perhaps, the stepbrother instigated his murder.] Zachary mused.

It wasn't uncommon for siblings from wealthy families to murder each other in cold blood for inheritance. Zachary found it hard to believe that a local prostitute had murdered a wealthy patron like Kasongo. There seemed to be a lot of facts that remained unknown to the public in his previous life.

"Does your brother know you're attending the Kibassa-Maliba trials specifically?"

"No," Kasongo replied, smiling.

"He only booked my hotel and left me to my own devices. He has never been a fan of soccer. He doesn't even know any of the teams here in Lubumbashi."

"What if your father pressures him to disclose where you are? He could pull you out of the trials then. Are you certain he'll keep his mouth shut even after your dad finds out you're gone?" Zachary asked, locking gazes with Kasongo. He intended to coax him away from locations known to his murderer.

"What if he pulls you out of the trial before it's finished? You would be blacklisted by all coaches and miss a shot at any other trials in DR Congo." He added.

"You do make a good point. What can I do?" Kasongo stammered. He looked panicked.

"You should either leave the hotel your brother booked and shift elsewhere or return to Kinshasha right away," Zachary stated. He intended to put Kasongo beyond the tentacles of his would-be murderers.

Kasongo shook his head in dejection.

"I can't leave," he whispered. "I heard that international scouts will appear tomorrow."

"You want to continue staying at your hotel?"

"Nope," he smiled. "I get your point. I'll move to another hotel right away." Kasongo stated. He stood up to leave.

"That's good," Zachary replied. He sighed in relief.

"Make sure it's a hotel where you can't easily be traced. I would hate to see the career of a talented player like you end prematurely."

"I understand," Kasongo smiled.

"I have already paid the bill. You should cut down on how much you eat. It'll be hard for you to perform if you get a heartburn tomorrow." He added.

Zachary nodded but continued stuffing salads into his mouth.

"It was nice meeting you. See you tomorrow at the trials." Kasongo added after hearing no reply from Zachary for a while.

"See you." Zachary waved. He would have plenty of time to talk to Kasongo the following day. Now that Paul's case was close to being resolved, he could return his attention to what was most important, food.

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