

Chapter 1: A Soccer Star Walks Into a Stadium

The rock that is in the middle of the sea does not fear the rain.

—*Gambian Proverb*

Every moment and sensation that evening felt epic. From the concession stands to the rows of supporters dressed in black and red and the families jumping up and down with painted faces, it felt like the entire city had come down to cheer on Toronto F.C. as they went head to head with D.C. United.

For thirteen-year-old Patrick ‘Ace’ Katumba, getting the chance to experience a soccer game live in the midst of an energetic crowd on a warm summer night was like a dream come true. This was Ace’s second summer in Canada after he and his family moved to Canada from Uganda and the first one with his new friends, the Misfits, he had made at Carter Parker Public School while overcoming some big challenges and bullies like Jamie Bishop.

There, sitting beside Ace, was the fearless and always cool Dwayne, known as ‘King,’ rocking his signature Toronto Raptors purple and black cap; the humble and very tall Ericksen (‘Tower’), whose face had been painted in red and white; the high-spirited trivia machine Lutti (‘Trivia’) recounting random facts about the game of soccer; and no-nonsense Matilda (Rebel), holding up a sign that read, “D.C. United, Get Ready for an Upset!” That was everyone except Tim Chung (DJ Gizmo), the group’s musician, who was spending the summer in Seoul, South Korea, with his grandmother.

Ace’s Uncle Jackson scored some tickets to take Ace and his friends to see the big game as an early birthday gift coming up in a few days in August. They were as close to the field as they could get, and Ace marvelled seeing players like Jonathan Osorio, Tyrese Spicer, and Nathaniel Edwards, practice together while taking cues from their coach. As they cheered and shouted, the referee blew the whistle unexpectedly. The announcer bellowed through his microphone, “Before we can start tonight’s match, we’d like the crowd to give a warm welcome and show of love to a Canadian football legend here with us: Kadeem Chance!”

The whole crowd went wild, especially Ace and King. They jumped up and down like someone had dropped balls of fire into their pants. Ace screamed, "Please pinch me and tell me it's not a dream!"

Before he knew it, he felt his forearm poked at two times. "Oww!" Ace screamed when he saw it was Trivia. "It was a figure of speech, bro!"

"The first one was for you and the second to make sure I wasn't dreaming too. That guy down below is selling cotton candy for two bucks!" Trivia's eyes widened as he stared at a young vendor selling cotton candy and bags of chips.

"What's the big fuss with this Chance guy? Everyone's shouting like he's got a hundred aura points!" Rebel asked curiously. She loved playing soccer with the Misfits but cared far less for the live games on TV. Her heart was of course in championing and protesting for social causes in their community.

"Chance is a legendary player and global phenom!" Ace exclaimed. "He's played for Chelsea in the English Premiership and helped them win two Champions' League trophies."

"Don't you dare forget that my bredrin is from Trinidad and the finest the world has ever seen!" added King.

Uncle Jackson chuckled and patted Ace on the shoulder. "Now you see why I was insistent you and your friends join for this game. A little bird called Olive told me that Kadeem Chance was both you and your dad's favourite player when he played for Chelsea, or was that Messi!"

Ace gave his uncle a hug and chided him for evoking Messi's name in the presence of the great Kadeem Chance. Uncle Jackson laughed out loud but not before the large teleprompter began showing ticket numbers like a lottery prize game.

"They're playing the lucky ticket!" Tower shouted as he and the other scrambled to find their tickets. The announcer could be heard saying that the lucky ticket holder would not only get to meet Kadeem Chance at halftime but also win a signed shirt.

Ace and his friends held their breath as the crowd began counting down to the reveal of the lucky ticket: "Five...four...three...two...one!"

"The winner is Section 204, Row 29, Seats 12 and 13!" yelled the announcer, and the crowd cheered and clapped. Ace was happy for the winners, a young boy and his father, but couldn't help but be sad that it

wasn't him and his friends. An opportunity to meet his hero and an all-time soccer great like Kadeem Chance!

"Don't worry, champ!" Uncle Jackson could feel Ace's change of emotion. "There's always next time. Maybe not with a big shot like Chance, but who knows? You may meet someone bigger. Besides, you're about to experience your first big soccer game!"

Ace laughed. "Thanks, Uncle! This is the best birthday gift, and at least I got to see Chance. Maybe when I'm a big-time soccer star, I can have everyone watch the game from the fan box and get everyone popcorn."

"Relax, hot shot!" Uncle Jackson rolled his eyes. "I'll get you guys your popcorn and cotton candy before Trivia over there jumps the poor concession vendor on the stairs."

As Kadeem Chance walked off the pitch waving at his adoring fans, Ace recalled a memory from his time in Uganda before his father, Godfrey, passed away. They had just finished watching a soccer match on TV, and Kadeem Chance had just scored the winning goal. Ace remembered being eight years old and running with a ball into their backyard.

"I'm going to be as good as Chance, Dad. They'll call me fire-foot Ace because no goalkeeper will be able to stop my shot," Ace boasted.

"My son, the soccer star! I do like the sound of that. But you're going to need to train and be the best of the best, Fire Foot! Maybe one day I'll be watching from the stands when my Ace-point goes toe to toe with Kadeem Chance. The crowds will go wild!" Godfrey bellowed.

"Whatever it takes! Whatever it takes! Chance, Chance, he's our star!" Both Ace and his father would chant like the crowds in Toronto, in the present day, sending their legendary star off the pitch.

