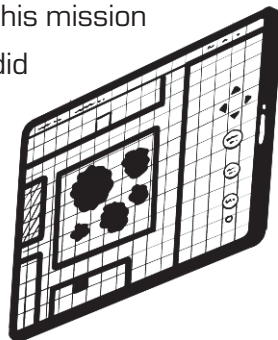


Chapter Eleven

'Remember, 006 – football first, spying second.' Those were Agent Swift's last words before Ethan left the Warren, but that was easier said than done. Because yes, his first mission did sound fairly simple – putting a tiny listening device along the back corridor of the academy building – but still, so far he had only completed twenty minutes of basic training! What if something went wrong?

As the 34 bus moved along Ferndale Road, Ethan's mind once more moved along the floor plan that Agent Swift had shown him, from the academy changing rooms to the spot marked 'X'. Hopefully he could complete his mission without being seen at all, but what if he did meet someone? Would he keep calm and get his excuses right, or panic and crumble under the pressure? There was only one way to find out . . .



'NEXT STOP: KINGSLEY BRIDGE.'

'Here goes,' Ethan muttered to himself, swinging his new Hurricanes kit bag over his shoulder.

Ethan Fox, football spy! Even he was still finding it hard to believe what he had just signed himself up for. Department Eleven, Operation Surge – this was a dangerous world that he was entering, and really, he had no idea what he was doing. But that also made it all the more exciting.

The fact that Ethan's head had been filled with things other than actual football for the previous twenty-four hours was probably no bad thing. Because as soon as he turned the last corner and saw the Hurricanes Training Centre in front of him, the fear hit hard and his heart dropped to the pit of his stomach.

Oh boy, this wasn't just a kickaround in the Cage any more; he was about to play with the big boys, some of the best Under-14 footballers in the whole country. Doing well in a one-off trial was one thing, but performing consistently at the highest level, week after week? That was going to be a whole lot harder.

Was Ethan ready to take on the challenge? He certainly didn't feel ready as he made his way through the main doors of the academy building, but fortunately the first face he saw was a friendly, familiar one.



'Yesss, mate, they picked you too? Get in, the Dream Team's back together!' Callum cheered happily, rushing over from the reception desk to dap him up. 'Come, we can collect our training kit here. What size are you?'

Phew! At least Ethan wouldn't have to face the whole 'new kid' thing on his own. He would have to face it though, and the battle began before he had even put his new training kit on.

'Huh, they picked *you*?!' Jayden snorted with a mix of surprise and disgust as soon as Ethan walked into the changing room. 'I guess we do need a back-up right-back and someone to carry the kit bags off the bus . . .'




As the other Hurricanes laughed along with their captain, Ethan walked on through, head down, and over to the empty benches in the far corner.

'Warm welcome, eh?' Callum muttered sarcastically, trying to ease the tension in the air. 'Hey, don't let it get to you, mate – we're Hurricanes now, whether Jayden likes it or not, and we'll soon wipe that smug smile off his face! Oooh, check you out, hotshot – more new boots!'

Ethan smiled shyly. 'Thanks, yeah. The, err, other ones were too big, so I swapped them for these.'

'Smart move – those are even better!'






‘Right, gather round, lads!’ Shaun Ferguson called out across the training pitch. ‘Before we get started, I want to introduce the new members of our squad: Callum . . .’

Standing at the centre of the semicircle of players, Jayden didn’t even bother faking a smile as he clapped his hands together in the quietest possible way.


‘. . . and Ethan.’

This time, Jayden didn’t even bother clapping. With arms folded across his chest, he just glared instead.

‘It’s great to have you both here and I’m really looking forward to working with you,’ the Hurricanes Under-14s manager continued. ‘OK, let’s get you all warmed up.’



‘Both’ – so the Hurricanes had only picked two new players from the trial, rather than four, and one of those was him! That news gave Ethan a little burst of pride and a welcome confidence boost as he joined the other players lining up behind the cones.



The buzz didn’t last long though. After a series of exhausting shuttle runs that he thought would never end, Ethan stood on the sidelines, bent over and gasping for air, his training shirt drenched in sweat. Just to reach the finish line he’d had to push his body to the limit, and yet looking around the group, everyone else except Callum seemed ready to go again.

'Whoa, I need to get fit FAST,' Ethan said to himself, swallowing down his sick feeling.

As his first Hurricanes training session went on, his mind filled up with more and more of these mental notes:

'I've got to get stronger.'

'I need to be better at tackling.'

'I really have to work on my turns - too slow!'

'I need to practise my left-footed passes . . .'

This was next-level football now, and Ethan could already tell that he had some serious catching up to do. As brilliant as he usually was at one-touch rondos, he had even had to take two turns as the piggy in the middle: once after miscontrolling a particularly fierce pass from Jayden, and once when he played the ball too close to the defender's long, outstretched leg.

'Unlucky!' Malcolm Hartwell, the assistant manager, said encouragingly each time, but out of the corner of his eye Ethan could see Jayden grinning with glee. His plan to show up the new kid was working perfectly.

Arghhh, come on, you're better than that! Ethan told himself, kicking the air angrily.

Fortunately there was still time for him to shine in the

five-a-side matches at the end of the session. There, Ethan found himself on the same team as number-one goalkeeper Lucas Peterson, plus three other boys who introduced themselves with their positions, instead of their names:

'I'm a defender.'

'I'll play in midfield.'

'I'll be up front.'

'You?' one of them asked eventually, as if they'd only just noticed that he was there.



'I play in midfield too,' Ethan replied, trying to sound as calm and confident as possible. But really he was just very relieved that he wasn't filling in at right-back, like Jayden had told him to.

In their first game, they faced a strong team starring Callum in attack and Jayden's friend Sam in midfield, but after a tight battle they finally found a way to win. Although Ethan didn't score the goal or get the assist, he did start the move with a clever pass to break through the opposition press.

'Hey, great ball!' the teammate he only knew as 'Up Front' shouted as they all celebrated together with fist bumps.

'Thanks,' Ethan said happily. Had Shaun Ferguson seen it too? No, on the sidelines the Hurricanes manager was



busy watching the other match instead. Oh well, Ethan would just have to do it all over again in their second game against . . . Jayden!

The Hurricanes captain had somehow ended up on the same team as star striker Dominic Okeke, which didn't seem fair at all. But Ethan wasn't going to argue. Instead, he was going to give everything he had left to try and beat them.

From the moment the match kicked off, his eyes kept scanning around, alert to any danger and alive to any opportunity. What Ethan was searching for was space, but there wasn't much of that on their small-sized pitch, and so he passed and moved and waited for something to change.

'Yes!' Ethan called out to Lucas, and as the ball rolled towards him he checked both shoulders again, to see if Jayden was closing in. But this time he wasn't; in fact, the Hurricanes captain had decided to stay deeper, leaving a gap for Ethan to spin and dribble forward into.

Soon, however, he found Jayden and two other defenders in front of him, blocking his path to goal and to 'Up Front' and their other midfielder too. What now? As a calm, quiet passmaster, Ethan was officially out of his comfort zone, and Jayden knew it.

'That's it, just hold your positions,' he called out loudly to



his teammates. 'New kid can't shoot, so he's got nowhere to go except backwards!'

Ethan could see exactly what Jayden was trying to do: make him shoot, make him fire an angry shot high and wide. There was no way he was really going to do that, but what if he pretended? Ethan pulled his leg back to blast it, and as the defender threw himself forward to try and make the block, he shifted the ball around him at the last second with two quick taps: to the left, then back to the right. Ta-da, gotcha!

Then as Jayden and the other defender rushed towards him, Ethan calmly slipped the ball across to 'Up Front', who was now all alone and couldn't miss. *1-0!*

'Excellent play!' Ethan heard the coaches clap and cheer on the sidelines. This time he had got the assist, and with the Hurricanes manager watching too!

There was one person, however, who was not so impressed: Jayden. Snatching the ball off one of the defenders, the Hurricanes captain marched forward with a face like thunder and took the kick-off himself. He meant business now, and for the rest of the game he charged



around like a raging bull, making a mix of fair tackles and fouls.

'Easy, Jayden! Remember, this is just training,' one of the coaches shouted, but he didn't listen.

Uh-oh, Ethan and his team were in trouble now. As hard as they worked, they just couldn't cope with Jayden's aggression combined with Dominic's sharp-shooting. Within a minute they had equalised, and when the final whistle blew they were 3-1 winners.

'Unlucky!' Jayden jeered at Ethan as the two teams walked off the pitch. 'Too bad you're just a one-move wonder.'

Back in the changing room, Ethan sat down in silence, breathing heavily and replaying every part of the session in his head. After much consideration, he gave himself an overall grade of B+ – *flashes of brilliance but can – and must – do better*. Not bad for a first day though.

'Hello? Ethan? Anyone there?' Callum's voice suddenly cut through his thoughts and brought him back to earth.

'Mate, you were miles away there! I was just asking if you wanted a lift home?'

Ethan smiled and shook his head. 'Thanks, but I've got a bus pass now, so I'm all good. Hey, don't wait for me – I'm taking ages. I'll see you on Thursday.'

'You sure? OK, see you later, mate.'

Soon Ethan was the last player left in the changing room. Perfect, just as he'd planned it. 'Football first, spying second.' Agent Swift's words flashed through his brain once again as he removed one of the tiny listening devices from the box in the secret pocket of his kit bag. It was time to complete his debut mission.