

Football 341

Chapter 341 341 A Phone call

[Saturday, 20th/July/2019, Rex Home, 13:23]

Rakim gripped the leather steering wheel of his birthday present, a mint-green 2019 BMW i8 roadster. The engine purred beneath him as they cruised along the sun-drenched streets of Orlando, heading towards Miami. The thrill of the open road, the warm wind whipping past, and the smooth, powerful hum of the hybrid engine brought an excited smile to his face.

"So," his dad began breaking the silence, "how does she handle herself? I test-drove it after it was shipped from the factory in South Carolina but if you want to change anything we can do so,"

Rakim kept his hands relaxed on the wheel, feeling the i8's responsive steering and smooth handling as he navigated around a gentle curve. He glanced at his dad, whose gaze was steady, watching him closely probably regretting some of the car knowledge he had taught his son. In hindsight, it probably wasn't a good idea to teach a 15-year-old how to power slide and drift around corners.

If not for the fact his son was way too busy and dedicated to his career, he would probably regret getting him this car for his sweet 16. "No, she handles like a dream," Rakim replied, with a wide grin as he accelerated onto the motorway. "I barely have to think about it, and she knows what I want to do. I will have to add some LED lights and a darker shade of green for sure,"

Ben chuckled, shaking his head. "haha I figured as much, you can talk to your uncle Joe, he can put you in touch with a good Custom shop, as long as you don't go tuning it out and it's purely aesthetic changes we won't have a problem. That means no going and adding a Nasca engine in this."

"haha don't worry I don't see the appeal in sitting behind the wheel trying to be the next Paul Walker, and racing just isn't for me. Just not my kind of adrenaline plus how would you know if they changed anything?" Rakim responded taking a moment to settle into a steady speed on the far right shoulder. He received a few looks from other people on the road causing him to feel a content smile at the freedom that came with owning your own car.

"Hahah trust me I'd know," His dad responded narrowing his eyes causing him to feel as if the atmosphere suddenly shifted just for that one moment. "Plus, your uncle Joe has people sweep the cars for any damage or sabotage once a month and every now and then."

Rakim raised an eyebrow at his father's words. "Sabotage? Who's trying to mess with us, Dad? Feels a bit... overkill to sweep for that."

His father nonchalantly leaned back in the passenger seat, his posture relaxed, but his eyes carried a hint of something deeper—concern, maybe. "You'd be surprised, son. In our world, it's better to be cautious than regretful. You're in the spotlight now, and People don't just see a talented kid anymore; they see a brand, an opportunity... or a threat."

"Haha, I didn't think buying a car came with a security briefing." he joked trying to lighten the mood as he and Emma had received different versions of such talks over the years. When they got older and gained more freedom their security protocol also intensified requiring them to make certain judgement calls.

"It's the price my family has to pay for the life that I want to provide for them, just like you have to deal with the fact you're a certain kind of celebrity the moment you decide to become a professional footballer," his weather said with a reassured smile letting his son know that it was set in stone and wouldn't change.

"Now take the next exit or you will be late for your surprise party," he stated before pulling out a pair of sunglasses and popping on song from his phone which was connected to the car. A few moments later Green 18 cursed off the motorway heading back out of the city centre as the roof quickly opened up, folding back allowing the sun's rays to drizzle down on them. In the next moment, Rakim also donned a pair of shades as the speakers sprang to life with Jay-Z's iconic voice.

[Turn my vocal up some more

Turn my vocal up, Guru

Turn the music up too Super Bowl goals

My wife in the crib feedin' the kids liquid gold

We are in a whole different mode

Kid that used to pitch bricks can't be pigeonholed

I cooked up more chicken when the kitchen closed

Oh, we gon' reach a billi' first]

~~~

[Saturday, 20th/July/2019, Rex Home, 16:00]

The Rex backyard buzzed with life as the warm Florida sun dipped lower into the horizon, casting a golden glow across the sprawling space. The infinity pool shimmered, reflecting the vibrant hues of the sky, while laughter and the occasional splash echoed from the kids playing at its edge. The picnic area was alive with conversation, a long table decorated with emerald-green and gold accents.

Lisa Madeline Rex, the mother of Rakim was in full hostess mode doing her best to make sure the party was running smoothly. Dressed in a turquoise sundress that matched her striking eyes, floated between the groups, making sure they were enjoying themselves. She carried a pitcher of iced lemonade, her light blond hair glowing under the soft sunlight.

Her husband, Ben Michael Rex, towered over most of the guests dressed in casual polo and chinos, sharing a laugh with a group of men. They were discussing recent trade rumours regarding the Miami Dolphins hoping Superbowl football would once again return to Florida. Under the gazebo, Rakim leaned casually against a post, as he listened to May tell him about some online marketing course and seminars she had signed up for the coming summer.

He was dressed in a crisp white polo and tan chinos, looking every bit the professional he was with the only bit of jewellery being his watch and the GLD chain. He had decided to dress more formally due to the fact his family had made the trip from England. So, the least he could do was show an adequate amount of respect to them despite knowing they wouldn't care that much.

"As long as I complete most of my work, I'll be able to join you in Brazil." She started with an excited smile looking every bit as vibrant in her sundress which depicted delicate floral patterns. "Obviously you

will be staying with the team, but surely you will have some free time we can spend together and maybe tour Rio de Janeiro"

Rakim smiled, his deep green eyes meeting May's. "Of course. you didn't get to go to Brazil with us last time so we should have some fun." Rakim responded also looking forward to spending as much time he could with her as possible. They were in the phase between talking and fully dating just needing that spark to label the relationship.

May's smile widened, but before she could respond, his phone sounded as the familiar apple ringtone rang out. "(Ding-ding-ding-ding, da-da-da-da-da-da, ding-ding-ding-ding, da-da-da-da-da-da), Sorry I have to take this," he told her excusing himself as he promptly pressed the accept button after noticing the saved number of Team USA. He had been expecting to receive a call from them sometime this month as they needed his commitment or that of the club he was about to join.

Rakim stepped away from May and walked a few paces toward the edge of the infinity pool, his heart pounding a little faster now. Despite not being born here he relished the chance to represent the country that gave him a second chance and he grew up in. He could choose one of his parent's countries but he didn't want to have to pick one over the other.

"Hello, this is Rakim," he said, keeping his voice calm, though he couldn't help the slight edge of excitement that slipped through. In his mind, he was already a lock as there was no other name in his age group that had accomplished what he had last season. However, he operated under a mentality that didn't allow him to count his chickens until they actually hatched.

"Rakim, it's Coach Garret I am the new interim head coach for Team USA under 17. How're you doing, kid?" The voice on the other end sounded young yet oddly familiar to him yet he couldn't quite place it. He sounded quite proud, reassured of his skills and the position he was in at least that's how it sounded to him.

"I'm good, Coach. Just enjoying a little time off with family. What's up?" he responded not really giving much weight to his thoughts, figuring it was just normal for men in positions of power where they could make or break young athlete careers. After all, representing your country in a major international tournament like the under 17-World Cup is a surefire way to catch the attention of scouts.

"Good to hear. I won't keep you too long, \_\_\_\_ I regret to inform you that we have chosen not to include you in our final list for the U-17 team going to Brazil for the upcoming World Cup."

Chapter 342 342 Graduation

[Saturday, 28th/July/2019, Rex Home, 12:00]

The sun bathed the open-air Eagles football field in golden hues, the sky a canvas of soft blues and scattered clouds. Rows of folding chairs filled the lawn, occupied by families brimming with pride and anticipation. Students who were now young adults were dressed in red gowns, with the occasional gold and blue shawl for those who were recognised for their academic achievements.

Sitting at centre stage facing the stage excited murmurs resounded every now and then as they enjoyed the moment. After 4 years of gruelling high school education and 3 years of confusion as middle schoolers, today they were being rewarded for their efforts. On the stage, a podium stood adorned with garlands of the school colours, while behind it, a banner read: "Red Oak Preparatory Class of 2019: Overcomers."

Emma Rex was the picture of poised brilliance in her gold cap and red gown as she stood next to the podium waiting for Dean Oak to introduce her. "Finally, please welcome to the podium, not only Red Oaks class of 2019 Valedictorian but also a US President scholar, Ms Emma Luisa Rex," clapping and cheering sound resounded in the football field as not only the students but also the parents in attendance all joined hands.

"Emma is one only in 3 in the entire school district of Orlando to be awarded this distinction, Emma is the daughter of Lisa and Ben Rex, and she will be giving her talents to the University of Cambridge in the UK," Another bout of cheering resounded throughout the field with the loudest voice all being that of Emma's father Ben. If any of his employees were to see him acting this rowdy they'd question where their all-so-serious CEO went.

"Emma has a 5.59 HPA and a perfect 4.0 GPA, Emma we are very proud of your accomplishments," Dean Oak stated with a bright smile before proceeding to shake hands with her. Following that he made for her settling down in his designated seat allowing her to make her valedictorian address.

Emma stepped up to the podium, the sunlight catching the golden tassel on her cap as it swayed gently in the breeze. She took a moment to glance out at the sea of faces—friends, teachers, family, and classmates who had become her entire world over the years. Her turquoise-gold eyes shimmered with pride and emotion, taking a moment to savour the feeling as both their support and her hard work bore fruit.

She adjusted the microphone again, leaned forward, and smiled warmly at the audience. "Good afternoon, Red Oak Preparatory, class of 2019! I'd like to welcome all faculty, alumni, friends, Family and distinguished guests to the 89th commencement ceremony."

"I'd like to apologise in advance for any music reference for my brother helped me tweak my speech, some of you might know of him as he is better known as the guy who accidentally started 3 food fights," her words once again caused a bout of laughter from the those in the audience as Rakim tried his best to avoid his mother's gaze.

"I'm just clumsy, that one time I slipped, ....and the last time my hand moved on its own. I think that's the week I had Kryptonite poisoning," Rakim rapidly explained, coming up with various explanations trying to plead his innocence, each one more ridiculous than the last. Lucky for him his sister continued speaking drawing everyone's attention, but he could still sense her occasional glances.

"On a more serious note, let me just say—wow. We made it! 'As a group, we did indeed start from the very bottom, now it looks like the whole team's here,' And to think, it only took four years, six coffee addictions, two Fortnite phases, one Game of Thrones meltdown, and countless hours pretending we knew what trigonometry was for." Laughter rippled throughout the crowd, allowing Emma to pause and catch her breath, letting it settle.

"To our parents—thank you for supporting us, even when we swore that writing a paper at 3 a.m. was a 'strategic choice' for peak creativity. To our teachers—thank you for giving us grades we probably didn't deserve after those 'strategic choices.' And to Google and SparkNotes—honestly, we wouldn't be here without you."

Emma paused for dramatic effect, letting the laughter subside before leaning in again with a mischievous grin. "And to the inventors of group chats—you gave us the illusion that we were doing homework together while really just sharing memes. Heroes of our time, Truly."

Another ripple of laughter filled the football field as the graduates exchanged knowing glances, some pretending to look anywhere but at their parents.

She straightened, her tone softening. "But seriously, being here today is no small feat. Each of us has had our own dragons to slay—whether that was mastering calculus, surviving a group project with that one person who always ghosted, or dealing with heartbreaks that felt like the end of the world. And let's not forget the year the Wi-Fi went out for a week. That was a true test of resilience."

The crowd chuckled again, this time joined by murmurs of agreement from the faculty. Emma took a steadying breath, her turquoise-gold eyes scanning the audience until they landed on her family. Her voice grew warmer. "To my parents, Mom and Dad—thank you for being my biggest cheerleaders. Mom, for always reminding me to dream bigger, and Dad, for teaching me that hard work beats talent when talent doesn't work hard. And my friends—"



She pointed dramatically at where Olivia and May sat "—thank you for your...creative interpretations of the rules. Honestly, my life would be dull without you, and I wouldn't know half the person I am today thank you,"

Emma's voice shifted to a reflective tone as she addressed the class. "Class of 2019, we are stepping into a world that's fast-paced, unpredictable, and sometimes, downright intimidating. But if there's one thing high school has taught us, it's that we're more than ready. Whether you're heading to college, jumping straight into work, or taking a gap year to figure it all out, remember you're not defined by your setbacks but by how you rise from them."

She paused again, her voice tinged with emotion. "And let's be honest, if we can survive senior year math, awkward prom photos, and the great cafeteria taco incident of 2018, we can survive anything." The crowd burst into laughter and applause, some wiping tears of mirth.

Emma lifted her chin, her tone brightening as she closed. "As we move forward, let's remember to be kind, to laugh often, and to work hard. Let's be the generation that doesn't just make history but changes it for the better. And when in doubt, remember the wise words of Beyoncé: 'Who runs the world? We do.' Congratulations, Red Oak Class of 2019!"

The grounds erupted into cheers, whistles, and applause. Emma stepped back from the podium, her cap gleaming in the sunlight as she waved to the crowd. As she returned to her seat, of honour on the stage next to other high-performing students. They were seated next to the deans, invited Alumni who had gone to achieve great things and the man of honour Florida's current governor.

The ceremony continued in full swing as more speakers were given the chance to speak with the students barely staying polite enough to not talk too loudly. Eventually, Carl Browns the Governor of the state of Florida stepped up to the podium giving a short speech before starting to announce the graduates' names.

One by one, students ascended the stage to receive their diplomas. Cheers erupted from different sections of the crowd as names were called, with proud parents and friends whooping and hollering. "May Parker graduating with honours" Rakim his family and May's stepmother stood up to cheer their voices easily reaching the girl on stage. Her father was also in attendance, but he had received a call moments ago and had to leave to take it.

"And now, we honour the valedictorian of the Class of 2019, Emma Rex!" The crowd erupted once more, as Emma walked across the stage shaking Dean Oaks hands and received her diploma from Governor Browns. After the ceremony concluded, the graduates tossed their caps into the air, a flurry of red and gold filling the sky.

Chapter 343 343 Dotted Line

[08/08/2019]

["Breaking news USA Phenom puts pen to paper in a 2-year deal with the Bundesliga Red Lions for a fee of £23.53m." Setting a record transfer sum for ACE, and any independent Academy.] Red The Guardian's front page attaining the attention of my football enthusiast and casual fans.]

['The left wing is just too crowded at Munich,' Rakim said when asked why he did not choose the German champions despite being a staunch supporter. 'A business decision over emotional one,' he called it when looking at the line of wingers which included new arrival Serge Gnabry, the Frenchman Kingsley, and the seasoned Ivan Perisic.]

["Rakim Rex Turns down Napoli and Spurs in favour of German football,"] BBC wrote as they showcased a picture of Rakim in a suit holding up a Leverkusen 22 kit with a bright smile. "Despite the initial favourable offer from Italian giants Napoli, the youngster settled on the German side. When asked why he had this to say, 'It came down to which team was a better fit, Leverkusen's young squad is what I need right now as I look to evolve as a player. I do, however, hope to play for coach Don Carlo in the future.]"

The buzz around Rakim's transfer was undeniable. Social media platforms were flooded with mixed reactions. Some fans hailed the decision as a smart move for his development, while others criticized him for snubbing more prestigious clubs. Underneath an Instagram post of him holding the Leverkusen jersey, the comments ranged from congratulatory emojis to outright accusations of lacking ambition.

@SClassInstigator: Haverts, Diaby and now MrClutch himself, it's about to get rowdy in the Bundesliga.

@BiggestHater: My man sold out, we were already expecting him here in London.

@Luigi: Whyy you no pick Napoliii, I give you free Pizza, No?

.

.

.

.

@May\_Parker: Congrats on making your dream a reality can't wait to see you score your first goal, P.S. Keep having fun.

~~~

[12/08/2019, 12:30]

The excitement surrounding the transfer continued to grow as Rakim's name trended across multiple platforms. Since he was one of the many exciting young stars that the world was watching. So his joining a team was big news. Especially when it saw him clash with The Terminator at Dortmund and Bambi who is poised to join the Munich 1st team.

News outlets dissected his decision, while football pundits debated whether it was the right move for his career. On ESPN FC, a heated panel discussion broke out:

"Look, it's clear Rakim Rex has his priorities straight," former midfielder Darren Clarke argued. "He's joining a team that values youth development. Leverkusen has one of the youngest squads in and knows a thing or two about nurturing young talents, and Rakim will get the minutes he needs to thrive."

"But Darren, don't you think he's playing it too safe?" interrupted ex-striker Jamie Rhodes. "At Napoli or Spurs, he'd face tougher competition that could push him to the next level. Leverkusen is solid, sure, but are they going to challenge for major silverware anytime soon?"

"Jamie, you know as well as I do," Clarke countered, "players his age need to focus on playing regularly, not sitting on the bench behind big names. Leverkusen's system is perfect for him to grow. Plus they are playing Champions League football this year"

They were just one of the few who talked about the transfer of the day. The news had dropped late last night with Rakim's side coming to an agreement with the Leverkusen side signing a preliminary contract. Now they were just waiting for the signing ceremony that was to be held in a few days.

~~~

"As agreed, a weekly wage of £23,076, a bonus of £100,000 If you manage to score 15 Goals this season. £50,00 bonus if you manage to get 10 assists and 75/25 Image rights split in your favour. As agreed a transfer release clause of £70 Million will be applied. " Simon Rolfes Leverkusen sporting Managing director stated with an excited smile as he placed the contract in front.

It had been finalised by both sides' lawyers adding what his mother and Simon Rolfes had agreed to. They had spent countless hours agreeing to different personal terms that aimed to protect both sides. "Frohe Zusammenarbeit," Rakim stated before signing the various parts of the contract after his side's lawyers once again cheeked over them.

They were being extra careful given that he was paying them quite a lot and they were auditioning to sign him as a long-term client. The pen moved swiftly across the final line, and with a sharp click, Rakim capped it. The deal was done.

"Willkommen zu dem Roten Löwen, wir erwarten Großes von dir, (Welcome to the Red lion's, we expect great things from you)" Rolfes stated with a happy smile in German as he once again took the Rakim to take photos and meet some of the fans.

Rakim had undergone another bout of physicals in the morning as he was poked and prodded by doctors. The Leverkusen management wanted to make sure that their investment wouldn't be wasted. In truth, they were already happy with what they called the steal of the transfer window.

~~~

"Alright, let's get this media session rolling!" A press officer clapped his hands, signalling the next stage of the day. "Rakim, grab your jersey and head to the backdrop."

He obliged, taking the pristine Leverkusen jersey with Rex 22 emblazoned on the back. The bright red fabric felt foreign in his hands but symbolized a new chapter—a blank page waiting for him to write his story. And he was ready as he had been waiting for this chance to play in one of the top five leagues since forever.

The flashes of the cameras were blinding as he stood under the spotlight, holding the jersey up with a confident smile. Beside him, Simon Rolfes posed with a hand on Rakim's shoulder, the club crest prominently displayed in every shot. Taking a seat behind the podium with both Simon Rolfes and Peter Bosz the team's Head coach.

"This question is for Rakim, You are known to be a staunch Munich supporter how will that impact you play against them in the league." A reporter of Sport1 asked the young man of honour after a few routine ones to both the team's manager and Director.

"Hahah, Camon, lasst uns nicht albern sein, Wenn ich Formel-1-Fahrer wäre und als Unterstützer von Ferari aufgewachsen wäre, würde ich es ihnen nicht leicht machen und stattdessen viel mehr versuchen, sie auf der Rennstrecke zu schlagen. (If I was a F1 driver and grew up supporting Ferrari, I wouldn't take it easy on them and would instead try that much harder to beat them on the track)." Rakim responded in almost perfect german if not for his slight american accent slipping through. Most of the germens present were pleasantly surprised as they hadn't known he could speak in their tongue.

He continued to expertly answer the reporters' questions giving concise responses. He did his best to be open wanting to use this chance to give the fans a chance to get to know him. "Final question, Wie viele Tore planen Sie in dieser Saison zu erzielen?"

"Hmmm not really sure," Rakim started acting as if he was seriously thinking about the question, then his eyes landed on his new Kit with the gleaming 2's. "I guess 22 is a good place to start," He stated with a bright smile before pulling out his necklace from under his hoodie displaying the diamond-encrusted tiger with two 2's on either side.

~~~

Meanwhile, across social media, the announcement spread like wildfire. Leverkusen's official account posted the signing video with the caption:

"Welcome to the Werkself Family, @RakimRex! Ready to light up the BayArena? #Rex22 #Werkself"  
Fans of the club flooded the comments with excitement:

@WerkselfFanatic: Finally, the move I didn't know we needed Can't wait to see him link up with Diaby and Wirtz.

@GermanFootyLover: Rex at Leverkusen? Bold choice. Hope he's ready for the Bundesliga grind.

@NapoliDieHard: We missed out 🙄 Forza Napoli anyway!

Chapter 344 344 First Training

x

[Mon, 12/08/2019, 9:30, Kurtekotten Bayer 04-Leistungszentrum]

The sun hung low in the morning sky, casting golden light over the meticulously groomed pitches of the Bayer 04 training facility. The air was crisp, filled with the faint hum of sprinklers and the occasional thud of a ball striking a net. Different players were strewn across the pitch going through their warm-up motions.

Rakim Rex stepped onto the pristine training grounds of Bayer 04 dressed in his black training gear. Used to the warm Florida weather he was donning a pair of black leggings under his shorts and his rex hood firmly placed on his head. His green eyes scanned the field, taking in the scene: perfectly aligned cones, a row of mannequins for free-kick drills, and the sharp contrast of red and black jerseys warming up under the watchful eyes of the fitness Coach and his team.

Rakim took a deep breath, the cool German air instantly filling his lungs as they quickly adapted. He felt like his engine was now receiving a jumpstart ready to take on the day. His heart beat a little faster as he looked around at his new teammates, he hadn't heard about all of them but those that he did were all considered real talents.

Rakim adjusted his Titan-Hood and jogged toward the group gathered near the centre circle, their chatter a mix of German, English, and Spanish. His heart thumped in rhythm with his footsteps, a mix of nerves and excitement coursing through him. He caught sight of some of the senior players, Kai Haverts, one of the main reasons he had chosen Leverkusen over Napoli.

He effortlessly controlled the ball as he went through light passing drills with Paulinho, Bailey and Diaby. Watching them for a good minute as they got a feel for the ball, he let out a contented smile. This was his team, and though he had just joined them, they had invested 24 million into him showing they valued his potential.



Not just that they had made his transition in Germany and the city of Leverkusen easy. Helping him with his hotel as they got him in touch with a few of the top Real estate agents so he could get settled as fast as possible. "Rakim, over here!" came the booming voice of Peter Bosz, the head coach, waving him over. Rakim made his way toward the Dutchman, his stride confident and genuinely happy that he was there.

"Guten Morgen," Rakim greeted as he stood next to the man who was staring on the field as his players routinely warmed up. "Go join Wendell he will be your buddy for the next few weeks, you might even end up working with him on the left wing,"

Rakim nodded, offering a polite "Danke, Coach" before heading toward Wendell, the Brazilian left-back. Wendell greeted him with a bright grin, his laid-back demeanour immediately putting Rakim at ease.

"Ah, Mr Florida come I show you how to play samba football, not American soccer," Wendell said, his accent thick but his English clear enough. He proceeded to dap him up before casually juggling the ball at his feet.

"Now I know you are special, heck the uncle who delivered oranges on his tricycle was also special. But you will have a hard time in the teams if you think like that without having accomplished here." He stated with a serious expression his laid-back demeanour disappearing for a second. Despite this, the ball remained glued to his feet as he flicked it up to his head balancing it for a moment before continuing.

Rakim watching him did not know how to take this guy, as he felt like his joking demeanour was simply a mask. This guy was a killer not in the life and death sense but in the park, he wasn't one to play games. The fact he perfectly kept the ball under his control while talking was all he needed to know about this guy.

He wasn't a journeyman but genuinely earned his spot on the team with hard work and talent. "Don't worry, we may not have Brazil's football history but Florida strong stands for something."

Rakim's retort earned a hearty laugh from Wendell, who flicked the ball high into the air and effortlessly cushioned it back onto his foot. "I like you already, garoto," Wendell said, his grin returning. "Florida strong, eh? Let's see if that means anything on the pitch."

The rest of the squad began to congregate near the centre circle as Peter Bosz blew his whistle, signalling the start of the main session. The players moved with practised ease, their movements coordinated and efficient, as they followed the Dutch coach's training plan. Rakim made sure to keep up with the rest of the team pushing himself to the max.

He wanted everyone to know that he wasn't just here as a gimmick and was a serious contender for a 1st team spot. He also noted how the team's core senior players like Havertz, Bailey, and Volland naturally commanded attention, their presence imposing even among the rest of the group.

Bosz clapped his hands after 25 minutes of dynamic stretches and fitness exercises with coach Bjorn, gathering everyone's focus. "Alright, gentlemen, standard rondo to start. Five-v-five plus two floaters. Wendell, Rakim, you're in the middle first. Let's see if our new signing can survive the gauntlet."

The group broke out into good-natured jeers as Rakim and Wendell stepped into the centre of the rondo. "Come on, Rex! Florida strong, right?" Wendell teased he confidently stepped into the centre not planning on staying there long.

Rakim simply ignored his words as he adjusted his stance, his green eyes scanning the circle for gaps as the ball zipped between players at lightning speed. Despite the coach not stating it no one took more than two touches moving the ball with efficiency.

They were all professional moving the ball faster than Rakim had expected them to do from the start. He wasn't intimidated though and instead felt a fire burn inside of him as his green eyes tracked the path of the ball. Bailey and Havertz played quick one-touch passes, and Wendell began moving bursting forward to close down the area.

Without hesitation, Rakim also moved but he didn't follow after to close Haverts down. Instead, he moved into the area slightly to the left of Wendle covering the area where he expected Havertz to send the ball. With his wide field of vision, he saw no need to expend more energy than necessary trying to close down. He'd feel stupid if he got injured on the defensive side of the game and specialised in interceptions and zonal marking.

He had realised that as an attacker who was on the extreme spectrum of attack, this was the best way of development for him. He could focus on simply attacking and do the minimum on the defensive side and still be effective like a less physical Kante. Thus, as Wendell closed in on Havertz he positioned himself in the area the left back left open.

He anticipated the path of the ball and despite it slipping past him he was right on the feet of Tah. The centre-back was startled by his sudden appearance and couldn't even react as he poked the ball loose taking control of it in the next second. Rakim wasted no time after winning the ball, pivoting sharply to escape Tah's immediate pressure.

He flicked the ball over an attempted challenge from Bailey, drawing a few impressed whistles from the surrounding players. Wendell grinned as he watched, jogging back into position. "Not bad, garoto. But can you keep that up all session?" Rakim smirked but kept his focus, nudging the ball back as Bailey who was to Tah's left had to join him in the middle.

Training continued like that as the players had fun using this as a chance to get to know each other. They would intentionally play passes to their new teammate wanting to test how he would react under pressure. However, if all Rakim had to do was pass the ball he wouldn't feel the heat, as his feet had an uncanny ability to send the ball in odd directions.

Weiser lunged into the path of the ball looking to intercept it but to his utter shock, the ball bounced off the ground flicking over his knee before calmly descending to the waiting feet of Bender. "Okay, Mr Florida, Stealing from Özil's bag of tricks I see you," Bailey exclaimed with a wide grin as he called for the ball to get in on the action.

Chapter 345 345 First Training (2)

[Mon, 12/08/2019, 10:30, Kurtekotten Bayer 04-Leistungszentrum]

Peter Bosz blew his whistle again, signalling a shift in drills. The players scattered into smaller groups, each heading to different stations set up around the pitch. Rakim found himself paired with Paulinho and Diaby for a quick-passing and movement drill.

Paulinho initiated the sequence, zipping a pass to Rakim, who controlled it smoothly and immediately sent it to Diaby. Diaby, with his lightning pace, played it back with precision, forcing Rakim to adjust his positioning. The drill was relentless, emphasizing speed, accuracy, and fluid coordination.

Paulinho, who had trained with Rakim and had watched him closely throughout the day gave an approving nod. "You've got quick feet, amigo. You'll fit in here." Not knowing how to react to his sudden words he simply nodded as he continued with the training.

After several rotations through different drills, the session culminated in a small-sided game. Rakim's team included Wendell, Paulinho, Havertz, and Jonathan Tah. Opposing them were Bailey, Diaby, Volland, Lars Bender, and Retsos.

The match was fast-paced pace focussed on fluid control and 3 touch football, leaving no room for error. Rakim quickly found himself in possession on the left flank, facing off against Lars Bender. With a quick shift of his weight, Rakim executed a Hocus Pocus, flicking the ball behind his standing leg before bursting past Bender. The veteran right-back stumbled slightly, drawing another round of cheers from the players watching.

Rakim didn't bother with that though as he sent a sharp pass towards the waiting feet of Havertz. Havertz received the ball with an effortless first touch, scanning his options. Rakim, not resting darted into the box, weaving between Volland and Retsos. Havertz noticed the run and lofted a perfectly weighted chip over the defence.

Rakim's instincts took over as he surged forward, meeting the ball with an outstretched leg. Making eye contact with the charging Hradecky as the ball softly nestled onto his right boot. The keeper had been in Germany long enough to have the fundamentals down.

So, it came as no surprise when Rakim didn't spot an obvious path through and should he take the ball down Hradecky would pounce on him. He wasn't worried though as he never planned on taking the ball down choosing instead to send it flying across the goal just in front of the retreating Retsos.

The Greek didn't even get a chance to react as the head of Paulinho speared forward slotting the ball into the empty net. "Yasss," The Brazilian striker exclaimed jumping into the air in joy before rushing towards Rakim.

Paulinho wrapped an arm around Rakim, a wide grin splitting his face. "That was perfect, amigo!" he exclaimed, giving Rakim a light slap on the back. Rakim chuckled, brushing off the praise as they jogged back greeted by the rest of their teammates.

Wendell was the first to reach him, tousling his dreadlocks playfully. "Florida strong, huh? Not bad, garoto. Keep playing like this, and we might actually win something this year."

A couple moments later Rakim came one-on-one with Hradecky, but the angle was too small. Not having another option, he went for a weighted shot towards the long corner. But the Finish Keeper showed just why he was the team's first choice, reacting like a cat on speed he sprang into action flicking the ball up enough for it to fly wide.

In another chance, Rakim sent a long chipped pass over the heads of his opponents, when he spotted Jonathan Tah charging forward like a bull in a coliseum. His pass was sudden but was timed right allowing Tah to chest it down before unleashing a carpet shot toward the bottom left corner.

Hradecky managed to get a hand to the ball, but Tah had put too much strength into the shot, and it pierced the back of the net. Those were just some of the few chances Rakim and his teams managed to create as he slowly started to get a better read of his new teammates. He had seen some of their tapes when Leverkusen seemed like a genuine destination for him.

However, it was one thing seeing them on his screen and a totally different thing playing with them in person. The style of football was something he liked sharp, efficient and fluid attacking football. He felt like he could thrive in this environment, happy at the choice he had made.

Peter Bosz's sharp whistle interrupted the moment, signalling the end of the session. "Alright, that's enough for today!" the coach called out. "Good work, everyone. Hit the showers and be ready for tomorrow."

~~~

[13:20, Kurtekotten]

Rakim emerged from the locker room, freshly showered and dressed in a crisp white coloured Titan-Fit hoodie and a pair of sleek, black sneakers. His dreads were tied back, still damp, and a faint trace of cologne lingered in the air around him. Slipping his bag over his shoulder, he headed out towards the parking lot with Wendell, Paulinho, and Diaby, who were still animatedly chatting about the training session.

"That flick earlier—what did you call it? Hocus Pocus?" Wendell asked, nudging Rakim with a playful grin.

Rakim smirked, adjusting the strap of his bag. "Yeah, that's the name. Did its job, right?"

"Did its job?" Diaby scoffed, laughing. "You made Lars look like he was ice skating! That was filthy."

The group erupted in laughter, their camaraderie evident as they approached the parking lot. A collection of sleek vehicles gleamed under the midday sun, showcasing just how lucrative the careers of the players are. Wendell tossed his bag into the back of his black Mercedes SUV before turning back to Rakim.

"Yo Florida," Wendell said, leaning casually against his car. "We're having a team get-together at Kai's place tonight at around 6. Just the players and their families. You should come. It'll be a good chance to get to know everyone outside of training."

Rakim hesitated for a moment, since he already had plans for the night, and he didn't want to change them on the dime. "I'll have to check with the misses we're supposed to have a date night. But this better not be a Brazilian party I've heard stories about how you guys like to party."

Wendell laughed heartily, shaking his head. "Nah, nah, don't worry, garoto. Kai's parties are chill—well, as chill as they can get with me and Paulinho there." He winked at Paulinho, who threw up his hands in mock innocence.

Paulinho chimed in, "It'll be worth it, amigo. Bring your girl too if you want. The more, the merrier."

Rakim smirked but didn't commit just yet. "I'll see what I can do. No promises, though."

As they continued toward the edge of the lot, the unmistakable hum of a finely tuned engine drew their attention. A dark mint green 2019 BMW i8 Roadster rolled smoothly into view, its green LED under glow casting a light futuristic hue on the asphalt. The windows were tinted, but the faint twinkle of starlight on the interior roof was just visible when the sun hit at the right angle.

"Damn," Diaby whistled, eyes glued to the car. "Is that your ride, Rakim?" Rakim simply nodded his head grinning as he adjusted his bag. "Yeah, got BMW to ship it to Germany when my signing got confirmed."

The car slowed to a stop beside them, the window rolling down to reveal May with a radiant smile, her hair flowing and sunglasses perched on her nose. "Making friend's I see?" she questioned as she leaned slightly out of the window, her smile widening slightly.

"He's more like my babysitter trying his best not to corrupt me too much," Rakim joked as he stepped to words the car leaning down towards May taking in her scent as a wide smile appeared on his face. Safe to say he was just as happy that she was here than when he got to join this team.

"Aight just think about it, Germans know how to barbecue, and Kai can grill with the best of them," Wendell stated seeing that the two were about to feed him dog food. Before they could even respond he dragged Paulinho away leaving the two to their thoughts.

Chapter 346 346 Sparks (PG16)

[Mon, 12/08/2019, 17:30, Leverkusen]

The sun was already falling at the end of the western horizon painting the streets of Cologne in hues of amber and violet. On one of the many national roads leading out of the city, the roaring of a mint green i8 could be heard as it speeds down the autobahn. On one of the national roads leading out of the city, the mint green BMW i8 roared down the autobahn, its LED under glow casting an otherworldly green light on the asphalt beneath.

It cruised at around 110 miles per hour holding steady on the inside lane. Many other drivers either did their best to avoid it or looked at it in wonder. There were the occasional few who tried to channel their distant relationship with Lewis Hamilton, but they were quickly ignored.

Rakim who was driving did not care one bit as he was busy focusing on the road and listening to May who told him about her day. She had been in Sweden to sign a few sponsorship deals. Ever since taking her career as a social media influencer, her media presence has ballooned as she posted various kinds of content.

Her work paid out as she amassed 250K followers on the gram, 100k on YouTube and around 50k or less on other platforms. Some might think it was because of his large following but in truth only about 50k of

her Instagram following was because of him. Due to the kinds of content, she posted, her following was growing rather slow.

She focused more on lifestyle posts such as locations she visits and things she happened to be doing that day. Also supporting the Hart Foundation became a big part of her platform. But the chunk of her content was of her being active, whether it was in the gym or through hikes or simple holiday locations.

It was like she was giving her viewers a glimpse into her life rather than curating content for them. "I Signed my deal with the Wings apparel and Aqua, but it was surprisingly the Aqua brand that wanted a long-term deal while Wings wanted a more short-term deal," she stated with a happy smile before continuing to tell him about how her first ever contract signing went.

Getting paid for what she does is like a certification for her that her career is not just a dream but a reality. Seeing her happy expression Rakim simply smiled back preferring to listen now that she was so happy. "I'm thinking of focusing on posting real skits on my TikTok and using it as a launch pad for my YouTube channel and other socials." She stated with a complete smile sounding as if she had come to this decision after a long time of thinking.

Hearing her words Rakim simply nodded before flooring the gas pedal as he manoeuvred past a car that sounded like it would combust at any moment. Ignoring the driver's eager look as he took the outside speed lane seemingly wanting to race, he simply manoeuvred the car onto a slip road exiting the Autobahn.

"Hey, are you even listening?" She questioned after not receiving an answer only now noticing that he had let her talk the entire time. "Of course, I'm listening, just trying to think of skit Ideas that could help you,"

May raised an eyebrow, a playful smirk forming on her lips. "Oh, I just figured I should just do a story time type thing or Joke's and if all else fails I'm sure my fans would love to see me simply style you," She stated with a half-joking tone but the finality in which she said it caused a shiver to run up Rakim's spine.

"Yeah that's not happening, even if you tie me up, torture me and threaten to destroy my PS4" Rakim replied with determination not willing to entertain her thoughts in the slightest. After all, he didn't plan on catching whatever disease the king of pop had caught.

"Oh common, can't you make this little sacrifice for little old me?" She coyly replied going as far as to stretch out a hand to play with a strand of his dreads. Despite her looking beautiful in her grey Jumpsuit/Pantsuit, he has no notion to agree with her no matter what.

Looking at her for a second, he once again focused on the road decisively shooting the Idea down in its infancy. "No, not even if we get married," He replied knowing that if he let this linger, she would find some way to convince him when he would eventually let his guard down.

"Oh, talking about marriage when you haven't even asked me to be your girlfriend officially?" she asked in surprise pulling her hand back to cover her mouth not at all expecting the sudden turn of the conversation.

"I need to ask again? What happened to equality and letting things flow naturally" he questioned in a joking tone not taking her shocked retort seriously at all already used to most of her reactions. Why she never took up acting professionally baffled him as she always managed to waffle out of any situation, she found herself in unless you knew she was lying from the get-go.

May gasped dramatically, placing a hand over her chest as if Rakim had just committed an unforgivable offence. "Excuse me? Yes, you absolutely do! This isn't some medieval times arrangement where you just assume things. I demand to be wooed, charmed, and—"

Rakim cut her off with a chuckle, shaking his head as the BMW i8 glided effortlessly through a tight curve on the slip road. The city lights in the distance shimmered like jewels on the horizon, a reminder of how far they'd come in their individual journeys. "You've been riding shotgun in my car, eating my food, and taking over my Netflix account," Rakim teased, shooting her a quick glance. "I thought that covered all the bases."

May crossed her arms, pouting in mock annoyance. "That just makes me a glorified friend you're close to! Where's the grand gesture? The flowers? The romantic candlelight dinner?" she took a second to gather her breath before continuing, "Heck, you haven't even kissed me yet, you're playing it too safe mister,"

Hearing her words Rakim raised an eyebrow not quite expecting her to bring this up however before he could respond she spoke again. "Don't take it to mean that I didn't enjoy the past weeks, they've been wonderful, all the dates, and time spent together knowing my feelings were returned but can't you be a regular boy for a second and not try to think things 7 steps ahead?"

Upon finishing her words May's green eyes focussed on Rakim who still had his focus on the road but she could tell he heard everything. The light curl of his brow whenever he had to think about something deeply and didn't have a quick response to something. It was almost like watching a computer trying to reboot whenever it was asked a question outside of its preprogrammed system.

Rakim's lips twitched, caught between a smirk and a full grin. He exhaled slowly as if steadying himself for a verbal sparring match. "Alright, May," he started, his voice measured but warm, "you want romance? A grand gesture? Let's start with this—"

He eased off the accelerator, allowing the BMW i8 to slow down as he took the next exit into what appeared to be a quieter part of the city. The streetlights cast long shadows across the road, and the sound of the roaring engine subsided to a gentle hum. Rakim pulled the car into a scenic overlook, the

city of Cologne sprawling out below them like a sea of stars. The amber and violet hues of the setting sun still lingered, blending with the city's glow.

May tilted her head, intrigued but sceptical. "What are you doing?" she asked as Rakim killed the engine and the lights dimmed. The sudden quiet was almost unsettling after the constant hum of the autobahn.

"Stay here," he said simply, unbuckling his seatbelt. Without waiting for her response, he stepped out of the car and walked around to her side. May watched him through the tinted glass, her curiosity piqued.

Rakim opened her door and extended a hand, his expression calm but earnest. "Come on," he urged, his voice low and inviting. May arched an eyebrow, taking his hand as she stepped out, her sneakers crunching softly against the gravel. "This better not be some elaborate excuse to get me to take pictures of the car," she teased.

Rakim let out a short laugh. "Now that you mention it, she is a beauty in this light," he teased seriously thinking about this since despite not being a car head he also appreciated sports cars. Especially his beautiful Astrid who looks all the better after getting a paint change and added tune-ups. "Rakim Simon Rex!" May exclaimed pulling her which he was still holding causing him to stop for a second.

"I wanted to show you something." He coughed out slightly shaken from his composure after hearing her say his full government, something she would only do when she was on the verge of being pissed. Calming down upon hearing her words he continued to lead her a few steps toward the overlook.

They stopped at the railing, the cold metal biting against their hands as they leaned against it. The city stretched out before them, alive with movement and light. It was beautiful, but May's attention shifted back to Rakim, whose expression had softened as he stared out at the view.

"You see that?"

Chapter 347 347 Sparks (2) (PG16)

[Mon, 12/08/2019, 17:50, Leverkusen]

"You see that?" he said, nodding toward the skyline. "Every single one of those lights represents someone going about their life—working, dreaming, struggling, winning. It's like... no matter what happens to us, there's always something bigger out there. A bigger picture."

May's brows knit together as she tried to decipher where he was going with this. "You're not about to get all philosophical on me, are you?"

Rakim chuckled again, shaking his head. "Nah, I'm just saying... life's complicated. In my case I can get lost in my head whenever I am not on the pitch, so thanks for being patient with me Miss Parker," He turned to face her, his light green eyes locking onto hers. The weight of his gaze made her stomach flip in a way she wasn't entirely prepared for. "So maybe I overthink things," he admitted, his voice quieter now. "But I don't want to overthink us anymore."

May blinked, caught off guard by all this as it felt much more raw than she had expected. For once, she found herself at a loss for words, her usual playful comebacks temporarily out of reach. Rakim didn't let her catch her composure tho as he reached his free left hand out to her face, tilting his head downward instantly capturing her lips.

May's heart skipped a beat as Rakim's lips brushed against hers, the gentle pressure igniting warmth in her chest that she wasn't sure how to handle. The world around them seemed to fade, leaving only the soft rush of their breaths and the distant hum of the city. She had expected this, fantasised about this, but the real thing was happening right now and all her carefully laid out plans for their first kiss evaporated from her brain.

May's hands instinctively found his chest, her fingers pressing against the fabric of his jacket as if grounding herself in this moment. Rakim's lips moved against hers with a slow, deliberate force, testing the waters before deepening the kiss. His thumb gently brushed her cheek, coaxing her to respond, to give in to the intensity.

Her breath caught in her throat as the kiss grew more urgent. Her heart raced in her chest, matching the rising tempo of their lips, which parted slightly as she let out a soft sigh. Rakim didn't hesitate—he took the opportunity, his tongue lightly grazing her bottom lip, teasing, asking for permission. May's body responded without thinking, her lips parting further to meet him, the warmth of his breath mingling with hers in a heady exchange.

His hand slid to the back of her neck, fingers threading through her hair, pulling her closer until their bodies were flush against one another. The touch of his lips became more insistent, more passionate, as if the moment couldn't possibly last long enough. May let out a soft moan, the sound barely audible over the distant hum of traffic below, but it sent a shiver through Rakim's spine. He deepened the kiss, his tongue tracing the line of her lip before he coaxed hers into a slow, deliberate dance.

May's hands, which had been resting on his chest, slid up to his neck, pulling him closer, almost desperately. The tension in the air was intimate, electric, and all-consuming between the both of them as their world blurred. She could taste the faint trace of mint from his gum, but it was lost in the intensity of the kiss, a kiss that had escalated from tender to needy in mere moments.

Rakim's grip tightened on her waist as he tugged her body even closer, their chests pressing together in a heat that made her pulse quicken. The kiss deepened again, slow and teasing at first before they both lost themselves in the raw, aching need to feel each other. His lips moved with a hunger that mirrored her own, each touch an unspoken promise, each breath a plea for more.

~~~

[Havertz's Household, 18:12]

"How many of your teammates did he invite?" May asked as they pulled into the large driveway spotting a plethora of luxury cars. There were the occasional 2 seaters like your Lambos, McLaren and so on but surprisingly most of them were more family-oriented cars like the Urus.

"I don't know, first day and all but he seems pretty friendly with most of the team so I wouldn't be surprised if a good chunk shows up," Rakim responded after settling on a parking spot just in between a red 911 and a blue Corvette.

"Ok, still feels a little weird going to these types of events without our parents," She responded as she did her finishing touches on her lipstick. She was forced to reply after their first kiss which quickly turned into a steamy make-out session leading to her carefully crafted hair being messed up.

She was forced to improvise and turn her hair into a bun which surprisingly gave her a more mature look. Using her makeup sponge to blend some of the light makeup that she felt was smudged she nodded to herself in a confident smile. "You look perfect," Rakim said, his voice soft but sincere earning him a genuine smile from her before they both alighted from the car.

"Wooah," May said with an astonished look on her face as she just now fully appreciated the grand villa in front of them. "Y'know, sometimes I forget just how much money footballers make,"

"Why do you think so many of us go broke or get into so much trouble with the life of partying and drugs at some point." Rakim absentmindedly replied as his brain immediately brought up perfect examples of



footballers wasting their careers while having fun. Adrian Mutu, Ronaldinho, The Brazilian prince of football himself Neymar Jr and many more were devoured by the fame that comes with the profession.

"Uhu, I see," May responded as she took hold of Rakim's hand squeezing it tightly causing him to turn his attention towards her. "Just because others are going out partying, and doing god knows what doesn't give you an excuse," she said firmly, her green eyes locking with his.

Rakim raised an eyebrow, a small smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. "I know, May. I know," he said softly, his thumb brushing against her hand. Her gaze was intense, but he knew she wasn't really worried about him. She knew him well enough and didn't think he would waste all his hard work by drinking and doing drugs.

As they walked towards the entrance of the villa, the sounds of laughter and music filtered out through the open windows. The villa was quite large and with a lot of large floor-to-ceiling windows illuminated by chandeliers that were already turned on. Walking towards the entrance they spotted the well-groomed grass that seemed manicured to perfection.

Ring the doorbell they didn't have to wait long before the beautiful figure of a brunette opened the large door with a bright smile. "Hey, welcome I'm Sophia, Kai is already grilling otherwise he would greet you himself," She stated after realising who had arrived. Despite only dating Kai for about a year she already paid attention to significant changes in her man's career.

So, the joining of a young wunderkind to his team wasn't something she would miss especially since all he needed was that one breakout season. So, the better the team did the more likely he was to achieve his dream something that was slowly becoming hers adjacent. Thus, she didn't hesitate to pull both May and Rakim into a quick hug's as a greeting before motioning them to come in.

Sophia stepped aside to let them in, her warm smile inviting them into the lavish villa. The scent of grilled meat wafted through the air, travelling from the garden all through the villa as the sound of friendly chatter and laughter grew louder. "Come through to the garden, quite a few of your teammates are already here," she stated as she led them through the spacious living room, adorned with sleek furniture and contemporary art on the walls.

"I love your shoes btw, are they Kate Spades?" she asked directly locking arms with May as the two immediately started a full-blown conversation. Seeing the two chatting as if they were the best of friends Rakim could only follow along trying to make his presence as faint as Kuroko's just in case he'd receive a left-field question that would land him into trouble.

Chapter 348 348 Bonding Tings

[Mon, 12/08/2019, 18:20, Leverkusen]

"I love your shoes btw, are they Kate Spades?" she asked directly locking arms with May as the two immediately started a full-blown conversation. Seeing the two chatting as if they were the best of friends Rakim could only follow along trying to make his presence as faint as Kuroko's just in case he'd receive a left-field question that would land him into trouble.

However, that was hard to do if he really thought about it given how handsome he was and how truly good-looking he thought himself to be. Even in his outfit that he considered business casual consisting of white AirForce's, black pants, a plain light blue T-shirt, a black A's baseball hat, his GLD chain and of course his silver Air King watch. If not for the universal rule that all famous people are good-looking one could easily mistake him as a model ready for a photo shoot.

As he quietly followed them through the villa, he couldn't help but glance around at the opulence of it all. The furniture was stylish but minimalist, with bold artwork's hanging on the walls. There were large glass windows offering sweeping views of the perfectly manicured garden, which, by now, looked like the scene of an outdoor feast.

Sophia led them out onto the garden patio, where the party was in full swing. The air was thick with the mouth-watering aroma of grilled meat, and the soft clinking of glasses and laughter filled the atmosphere. Rakim spotted some familiar faces of his teammates whom he had met on the training ground earlier that day. Most were embroiled in conversation with their friends or were chatting with their dates in a few of the lounge areas strewn about in the garden.

His eyes however quickly travelled to the figure of Havertz, standing behind a Pit Boss Memphis grill hard at work cooking it up. For some reason, he was wearing a white apron with a Charizard holding a spatula and Tong in both hands. The white large chef's hat on his head seemed to make him a master cook as he started flipping burgers while chatting with Witz and Andrich.

Nodding at the trio he quickly found the figure Wendell near the bar as he let May continue chatting with Sophia who led her to some of her friends. Making his way over to the Brazilian defender who was leaning casually against the wooden counter of the bar with a drink in his hands. His arm was draped around the waist of a stunning Brazilian model who seemed to be enjoying the party.

"Ah, Mr Florida!" Wendell said with a thick Brazilian accent. "You're looking sharp, my friend," he stated before dapping Rakim up who joined his group only now noticing Paulinho behind the bar. It seemed the striker was doing his stint as a bartender using the skills, he had picked up at last year's Sao Joao festival.

"I see you're having fun," Rakim grinned, glancing at Wendell's arm around the model's waist before turning his attention to Paulinho, who was expertly shaking a cocktail behind the bar. "Looks like you've got the bar under control," Rakim remarked, tipping his head toward the striker.

Paulinho shot him a playful smile. "You know, I could teach you a few moves it's a hit with the ladies." he teased, winking as he finished preparing a drink. "Oh, and what ladies do you intend to impress," a velvety voice said from behind him revealing the figure Daniela whom Rakim knew as a Brazilian model.

The reason he knew her was because she had been on the cover of some makeup brand on his flight to Germany. Daniela's appearance caught everyone off guard, most of all Paulinho who almost lost hold of the cocktail shaker. "No one of course just trying to pass my wisdom to my new protégé since I won't be needing them, babe," he smoothly responded after taking a second to compose himself.

"Here I just made a drink for you I call it 'Minha estrela do amor'," He stated handing her the red liquid that now filled the cocktail glass with a single cherry floating in the middle. Looking at how exquisitely the drink looked made me completely forget that this guy had just called himself my master.

With that Bomb defused they continued to talk with each other doing their best to introduce Rakim to all he needed to know about Leverkusen. The dynamic between the different egos in the team and toes he should avoid stepping on and those he couldn't avoid. Now that they had 4 wingers the duel for the flanks would be fierce and he wouldn't be safe despite being the only one of the four who focussed on the left wing.

~~~

[Later During the Night, 20:10]

Later that night, the atmosphere in the villa shifted. The music had been replaced from upbeat to a more mellowed-out relaxing tune as the night grew deeper. Fairy lights and the flames of the fire pit illuminated the garden as the players and their dates huddled together on bean bags. Most who had brought their children had already left having to take care of their most important job in life of getting home in time to feed their cats.

"This reminds me of the fire pit at your parents," May whispered into my ear as she snuggled deeper into my embrace getting more comfortable on my lap as she resumed her favourite activity playing with my hair. Sometimes she reminds me of a baby cat with how she can play with my locks for hours on end.

"We should look for a place with a pool and pit in it," I responded liking the prospect of a big garden with different sections and amenities for every occasion.

"We? Y'know I haven't even decided if I will stay in Germany full time," she retorted as her movements paused causing me to tilt my gaze down to her. Raising an eyebrow as she matched my gaze, "What you want me to find some other girl to help me pick out a house and decorate it?"

"You wouldn't dare," she retorted as one of her hands proceeded to twist my skin on my neck causing a jolt of pain to shoot through my body. "Argh Alright, alright, haha" I chuckled, trying to hide the sharp sensation which was more surprising than anything.

"But if you don't stay who will take care of me?" I questioned trying my best to put on my best sympathetic look. "You're a grown now I trust you," she replied curtly before going back to playing with my hair as she leaned back into him.

"I'll play a couple games before I start looking for a place to live, but you could easily set up a studio in one of the rooms once I find a place," he stated as his gaze shifted, watching the fire pit flicker in the soft night breeze, illuminating the faces of his new teammates leaving May to her thoughts.

~~~

"Should we play a game of truth or dare?" Wendell questioned the rest of the group which now consisted of, Kai, Me, Wirtz, Diaby, Bellarabi and their respective dates.

"What are you like 14 or something?" Bellarabi questioned not at all understanding why any of his teammates would even consider playing such a childish game that only causes problems. "We can't all be as laid back as you Grandpa," Wendell replied poking fun at the 30-year-old macaroon winger.

"Fine," Bellarabi groaned, leaning back on the bean bag with a smirk. "But don't cry when you get roasted."

"Roasted?" Wendell laughed, shaking his head. "Truth or Dare is about fun, man, not roasting. Unless, of course, you're too scared to answer."

The challenge was laid, and Bellarabi simply shrugged, glancing around the group. "Alright then, let's see what you've got, Mr. Brazil."

Wendell grinned, looking around the circle for his first victim. His eyes settled on Kai, who was leaning casually against the armrest of a sofa, sipping a beer. "Kai," Wendell called out dramatically, pointing at him. "Truth or Dare?"

Kai chuckled, setting his beer down. "Truth. Let's keep it safe to start." Wendell tapped his chin, pretending to think deeply. "Alright, who's the most annoying teammate to play against in training?"

The group burst into light laughter, with everyone throwing out guesses. "Easy," Kai said with a grin. "Diaby. That guy's pace is a nightmare. You can't even foul him because he's already gone."

Diaby laughed, raising his glass in mock celebration. "Fast and uncatchable, just the way I like it."

"Too fast for your hairline," 17-year-old Witz stated with no remorse seemingly saying the first thing that popped into his head.

"Phahhah"

Chapter 349 349 Bundes Liga

[Friday 16/08/2019, 19:10, Leverkusen]

Rakim had now spent a whole week in Leverkusen getting fully acclimated to the German city and his new team. Most days started as early as 5:30am which saw him go through his stretch routine and mental stimulation which consisted of him reading a book while going through the exercises. Around 6am he'd get to spend an hour in the pool pushing himself trying to get his muscles working with various water exercises.

His water exercises were finished off with a 10 minute Ice plunge which had become routine for him over the years. 20 minutes were his only free time in the morning which was the time between his cold plunge and breakfast. That would usually be when he would meet May for the morning who had no intentions of getting up before 6am.

From 7:30 to 9:30 he was free, and he spent it with his girlfriend joining her in whatever activity she happened to be doing that morning. It was his way of trying to make time for her and he genuinely didn't mind it as it allowed him to unwind and forget training for a while. Since he had managed to convince her to stay in Germany with him, he wanted to make her feel as comfortable as possible.

That was the only respite he got during work days which were Monday to Saturday in his eyes as from 9:30 to 19:00 he'd be at the Kurtekotten Performance Centre grinding his heart out. The strength and

conditioning coach Gunter had made making him Bundes Liga ready, his personal pet project. Especially after noticing that the 16-year-old winger pushed himself to the brink completing any exercises he laid out for him.

The fact he refused to lift weights didn't bother him in the slightest as he made use of his university degree to the fullest to design exercises around callisthenics. Weighted vests and dynamic agility drills became his forte as he man-tailored a specialised plan for him. However, he spent the majority of his time on the football field working on his ball skills and with the rest of the team.

It was after finishing his 8th day that he found himself seated in the team's lounge after getting cleaned up in the showers. "It's finally starting, I love these moments at the start of the season," Wendell stated as he plopped on the sofa next to him. Rakim nodded, a faint smile playing on his lips. Wendell was one of the few teammates he'd bonded with quickly, and the Brazilian's infectious energy often lightened the mood in the locker room.

Sending a quick text to May letting her know he'd pick her up from her photo shoot after the match Rakim put his full focus back on the room. His teammates formed small clicks as they ate some healthy snacks or drank their protein drink chatting with each other only half listening to the discussion on the TV. Those who had been playing in the Bundesliga for quite some time were already used to the di\*k riding the media did when it came to the King of German football.

"They might as well hand them the trophy right now," Paulinho stated with a disgruntled expression as he continued scrolling through his Twitter feed. Since he was a professional athlete in Germany now, his phone also acclimated to his location automatically linking him with relevant news.

Given his age of only 18, it came as no wonder that he was pretty active on social media landing him in hot water quickly. The mute function didn't exist for him as he somehow ended up joining fan chat rooms where the staunches of fans waged wars. None of it was backed by logic as once passion seemed to be able to allow one to forget common sense and take on 20 people at once.



"You need to stop before you do something stupid," Tah told him from behind the sofa as he spotted the striker frantically typing on his phone utilising the little German he knew. "They just called me a KiK budget Pele, ... What is Kik is that good?" he retorted sending his question to the German people players in the room only to receive awkward glances from them.

~~~

The lounge was bustling with activity as more players trickled in, grabbing snacks or settling onto the plush couches that faced the wall of flat screens. The biggest one in the centre displayed the pre-match proceedings for the Bundesliga season opener: Bayern Munich vs. Hertha Berlin.

On-screen, the iconic Allianz Arena glowed under the floodlights as fans poured into the stands, a sea of red and white scarves waving in unison. Dietmar Hamann, Lothar Matthäus, and Nele Ocik were deep in conversation, their voices smooth and engaging as they dissected the tactical setups of both teams.

"Bayern will dominate possession, no question about that," Matthäus said, gesturing towards the lineup displayed beside him. "With Kimmich and Thiago controlling the midfield, they'll look to feed Lewandowski and new arrival Gnabry constantly as they look to see what he is made of."

"Hertha, on the other hand, will need to rely on quick transitions," Hamann interjected, tapping his pen against the desk. "Grujić and Lukébakio will be key. If they can capitalize on Bayern's high defensive line, they might stand a chance of surprising Kovac's men."

Nele Ocik nodded, her sharp features illuminated by the studio lights. "Absolutely, Dietmar. But let's not forget the pressure on Bayern's backline. Pavard and Süle are solid, but they can be exposed by pace. Lukébakio already proved last season he can trouble even the best defences." She paused, glancing at

the camera. "And the Allianz Arena crowd will want nothing less than a statement win to kick off the season."

Rakim watched as the screen switched to a live feed of the players warming up on the field. The Bayern squad moved with precision, going through the last of their warmup drills trying to get as sharp as possible. The Hertha players, by contrast, seemed looser, perhaps feeding off the fact they had nothing to lose since they were battling the best team in Germany.

"You'd think Bayern were playing for a Champions League final with how seriously they warm up," Wendell chuckled, tossing a handful of trail mix into his mouth.

"That's why they're Bayern," Rakim replied, his tone taking on an excited tone after realising the fact he would get to play against them this season. However, seeing how seriously they took the match he figured it had to do with the weight of history that was on every player. It was much like how joining one of the two LaLiga giants who are filled with the glory of past victories and legendary moments they created.

"You regret not joining them?" Wendell responded poking the winger who had his eyes glued on Muller who could be seen doing a passing drill with Kimmich and Thiago.

"Naw I'd rather beat my favourite team than sit on their bench," he replied before refocusing on the screen where the camera had once again panned over to the pundits in their studio. On the screen, the camera panned across the Allianz Arena, capturing the fervour of the crowd. Nele Ocik's voiceover provided the context. "The reigning champions are coming off a successful season but face increasing pressure to maintain their dominance. Meanwhile, Hertha Berlin, under new management, hopes to make a statement tonight."

At around 19:20 The broadcast cut to the teams lining up in the tunnel, Rakim leaned forward, his focus sharpening as he could feel the excitement bubbling up within him. The Hertha players now wore more resolute expressions, while Bayern's stars exuded the calm confidence of a team accustomed to the spotlight. Derek Rae and analyst Stewart Robson took over as the match commentators.

As the players began their walk onto the pitch, the atmosphere in the lounge grew quieter, the hum of conversation replaced by the commentary's sharp clarity. Derek Rae's voice carried over the room, brimming with enthusiasm.

"And Here they Come!"

Chapter 350 350 Gunner

[Friday 16/08/2019, 19:10, Leverkusen]

"And here they come! Bayern Munich, the reigning champions, taking their first steps toward what they hope will be another record-breaking season. Hertha Berlin, the challengers tonight, have an uphill battle ahead, but they've shown they can upset the odds."

Stewart Robson added, "It's a big night for Lukébakio and Grujić. If Hertha has any hope of walking away with points, those two need to be at their absolute best. But Bayern's firepower is just immense. Lewandowski, Müller, Gnabry—the list goes on." Their conversation continued as they introduced both teams line ups while the final pre-match proceedings concluded.

Bayern XI 4-3-3

GK: 1 M. Neuer

LB: 27 D. Alaba

LCB: 5 B. Pavard

RCB: 4 N. Süle

RB: 32 J. Kimmich

CM: 6 Thiago Alcântara

CM: 24 C. Tolisso

CM: 25 T. Müller

ST: 9 R. Lewandowski

RW: 22 S. Gnabry

LW: 29 K. Coman

Coach: N. Kovač

VS

Herter XI 3-4-1-2

GK 22 R. Jarstein

CB: 4 K. Rekik

CB: 5 N. Stark

CB: 13 L. Klünter

LM: 17 M. Mittelstädt

CM: 6 V. Darida

CAM: 10 O. Duda

CM: 15 M. Grujić

RM: 11 M. Leckie

LST: 19 V. Ibišević

RST: 28 D. Lukébakio

Coach: A. Čović

The referee's whistle pierced the air, signalling the start of the match. Lewandowski tapped the ball back to Thiago Alcântara, who immediately looked up, scanning the field for options. Bayern's intent was clear from the outset as they moved the ball crisply, their passes pinging across their ranks already trying to assert their dominance.

Within moments, Kimmich and Thiago orchestrated a triangle with Müller, probing Hertha's compact defence. Lewandowski darted into a pocket of space just outside the box, pulling Rekik out of position. Müller doing what he does best exploited the gap left behind, receiving a deft flick from Thiago. The crowd roared as Müller shaped to shoot, but his effort ricocheted off Stark's outstretched leg, the ball skimming just wide of the post.

"That was a close call!" Derek Rae exclaimed. "Hertha can't afford to leave gaps like that, especially with two foxes like Lewandowski and Müller trying to score a goal." Bayern's resulting corner was swung in with venom by Kimmich. Süle utilised his height well and towered over his marker as he rose to meet it but nodded the ball over the bar. A sigh of relief swept through the Hertha contingent in the stands.

~~~

[10th Minute]

Hertha clearly instructed to strike on the counter, found their rhythm after surviving Bayern's early barrage. Mittelstädt darted down the left flank, leaving Pavard scrambling as he whipped a dangerous cross into the box. Lukébakio, lurking at the far post, leapt high but was sandwiched between Süle and Alaba, who managed to clear the danger with a collective effort.

Hertha recycled possession quickly, with Grujić showcasing his physicality in midfield, shrugging off Tolisso before threading a perfectly weighted through ball to Lukébakio. The winger's pace burned past Pavard, and with Neuer rushing off his line, Lukébakio attempted a cheeky lob. However, his attempt agonizingly sailed over the bar, drawing gasps of disappointment from the neutral and Herther fans.

"That's the kind of threat Lukébakio brings," Stewart Robson observed. "Bayern's high line looks vulnerable already."

[24th Minute]

Bayern resumed their dominance, pinning Hertha back with relentless pressure. Gnabry especially showed out trying to show the fans why it was a good decision for the club to bring him on. Utilising his quick and nimble on the right wing, making his marker's life a nightmare as they struggled to adjust to his play style.

Receiving another chance after a strong pass from Kimmich he rounded his marker and immediately charged down the flank. Before he knew it, he was dancing past one, the two and a third defender before facing Mittelstädt who tracked him down. Not losing his drive though he faked a breakthrough down the wing before cutting in at a moment's notice. The left mid didn't have a chance to react as Gnabry unleashed a venomous strike.

Jarstein in between the sticks was forced to react at a moment's notice not at all expecting the sudden shot and he rose to the challenge. Stretching his hand to the max he dove to his near post parrying the ball brilliantly, but to his horror the ball rebounded to the feet of Lewandowski, who didn't need a second invitation. The Polish striker slammed the ball home from six yards out sending the net bulging before sprinting to the erupting sidelines.

A sea of red greeted him as Bayern fans erupted from their seats as he swaggered to a stop at the corner flag doing his iconic fist-clenched celebrations, before being swamped by the rest of his teammates. "Robert Lewandowski, you cannot get any better than perfect," Derek Rae exclaimed following the striker's goal caught up in the moment.

"22 league goals, another prolific season, another new year starts with a goal from the poll Lewandowski again for Bayern," He continued speaking awakening the emotions from not just the Bayern fans but the wider Bundesliga viewers who tuned into the match. It was as if he was stating the fact they were watching someone truly special right in their own league.



~~~

[28th Minute]

Hertha was rocked by Bayern's opening goal, but they quickly regained composure, tightening their shape and focusing on keeping the ball moving. Duda, the creative spark in their midfield, attempted to orchestrate an attack, but Bayern's press was relentless. Thiago and Tolisso shadowed his every move, denying him space to dictate the tempo.

On the counter, Grujić launched a long ball forward, looking for Ibišević's hold-up play. The Bosnian striker, despite his age, showed his strength, shielding the ball from Süle before flicking it to Lukébakio. With a sudden burst of pace, the Belgian winger looked set to threaten Bayern's goal once more. But as he cut inside to line up a shot, Alaba's well-timed challenge halted him in his tracks. The Hertha fans groaned in frustration, knowing they were so close to a dangerous opportunity.

"That's the kind of defensive heroics the fans have gotten to expect from him," Stewart Robson noted as a replay of Alaba's well-timed tackle was showcased in the replay. "He is truly on top of his game, and he continues to get better by the years,"

"I agree as long as he is healthy that Bayern's defence takes on a whole new level," Derek noted before going into detail on some of his best features that make him such a superb defender. However, most viewers were focused on Bayern who immediately pushed forward again.

The ball was played to the right flank to the feet of Kimmich who played it wide Gnabry, sending him running down the flank. Sensing another opening, he shifted gears and whipped in a low cross into the

box before Mittelstädt could close him down. Lewandowski was already anticipating the ball speering into the box almost getting a touch to the ball, but the ball was intercepted at the last second by Hertha's Rekik. Hertha's defence was really starting to feel the pressure mount as Bayern turned on the screws trying to capitalise on the momentum.

[36th Minute]

Bayern's pressure had been relentless, and Hertha was beginning to buckle under the weight of it. As the ball was cleared by Rekik, Bayern immediately regained possession in midfield. Thiago growing in his role as his team's orchestrator, distributed a short pass to Tolisso, who swept it wide to Kimmich. Kimmich's first touch was a thing of beauty, allowing him to control the ball as he shaped up for another potential delivery.

He didn't hesitate once he found an opening and swung in a cross that was met with an audacious clearance by Hertha's Klünter, sending it straight back to Bayern's midfield, where Tolisso and Thiago continued their intricate passing game. But Hertha's defence finally had an answer, stifling Bayern's every move in the final third. Yet, despite the pressure Bayern applied on their visitors, it was Hertha who would strike next.

Grujić, who had been quietly effective in midfield, pounced on a loose ball, intercepted from Müller's lazy pass in the middle of the park. Not even hesitating for a single second, he surged forward, catching Bayern's defence off-guard. He threaded a beautiful through ball to Lukébakio, who sprinted into space, unmarked by Alaba or Süle. The crowd held its breath as they watched the striker beat the offside trap.