

Football 361

Chapter 361 361 John Cena

'Well, Shit!' was the only thing that popped into his mind as he read through all the system notifications. He had been complaining about the lacklustre offerings in the system shop for a while despite the fact how cheap the products were. However, now the system was saying those were just beginner prices annoying him to some extent.

{Well, what did you expect? You should have guessed as much just by looking at the bottleneck you hit in upgrading some of your stats.} Eva commented sounding rather amused earning her a disgruntled rant from her host.

'I'm not saying it's your fault but a little hint, you know a wink, nudge, would have been helpful. Basically, what I am saying is Siri would have reminded me,' Rakim retorted as he walked through the corridors heading for the private parking lot meant for staff and players.

{Don't compare me to that primitive excuse for an AI, I gave you every opportunity to ask me.} She retorted in an indignant tone before continuing her rant, {it's not my fault that you didn't have the brain cells to do so, why do you think I'm here other than cleaning up after you?}

'Sigh, at least your cousin Google knows how to give suggestions, you should take a page out of her operating manual,' he replied still sounding dejected but inwardly he knew just how much he liked messing with her. She sounded surprisingly human whenever they got into one of their arguments, even though both knew it was all in good fun.

{You know maybe you are right,} she responded out of left field catching him off guard almost causing him to trip just as he exited the BayArena. {I should probably start charging you for some of my services, you know you get what you pay for type thing,}

Her tone sounded calm but to Rakim, the mere notion of it sounded horrible as he could already imagine how much SP would go down the drain. Even though he hardly spent it allowing him to save up quite a bit over the years only spending it on something he actually needed and wanted like his Bronze Heavy artillery (Active) skill. However, if he started paying for information, he would quickly go broke given the amount of useful info she gives him daily.

'Alright you win, no AI has anything on you, you are truly a mighty lady Eva continue to grace me with your wisdom,' He quickly replied as he started looking for his ride expecting May to pop into his vision any moment. {(Hmpf) Good that you know,}

[Ding: SINGULARITY SHOP (Open)]

[Skills]

- Bronze Level Dead Ball Specialist: 500->1000 Sp (Active Skill)

- Silver Level Goal Sense: 7,200 -> 15,000 Sp (Active Skill)

- Emperor's eye: 25,000 ->100,000 Sp (Passive)

.

.

.

- Bronze Strong Handle: 20,000sp (Passive) *new*

[Training Consumable]

Blue Energy Drink: 100 -> 200 Sp (Gives 50 -> 20% more energy) 2hr -> 3hr Duration

Hunters Focus fruit: 200 ->400 Sp (Increases 15% Focus boosting retention of knowledge and skills) 60 -> 45 minutes duration.

Green Slime Potion: 50 -> 200Sp (Massages the body after an intense training session reducing the risks of injury by 50 -> 25%)

Recovery Potion: 250 -> 400 Sp (Allows the host to Recover from fatigue 50% faster)

(Bronze) Gym Rat Membership: 1,000Sp (Boost training results by 5%)

(Silver) Gym Rat Membership: 4,000Sp (Boost training results by 7.5%)

(Gold) Gym Rat Membership: Requirements not met

(Hall of Fame) Gym Rat Membership: Requirements not met

[Trait Store]

Iron Man Requirement: S-grade Stamina and Strength 25,000 SP

Flair Requirement: A+ Grade Agility and Speed 30,000 SP

.

.

.

Trapping Mastery Requirement: SS Football Technique Price: 150,000 SP

'Hey, Eva you can see this too, right?' were Rakim's first thoughts after quickly scanning through the system's new shop. Tumultuous amounts of emotions and thoughts ran through his mind but in the forefront was one word 'fuck'.

{Yes,} was all she had to say sounding rather professional almost like the response you'd get from a customer service rep after spending 2 hours waiting. 'Don't 'Yes' me, tell me why the systems decided to hike the prices that much.'

He was clearly flabbergasted by the situation but part of him was also excited by the thought of colourfully skills in front of him. Just two or three of them could turn an average player into a star as long as they put in the work. And if he was being honest, he felt the prizes were quite reasonable when looking at what the skills did, but part of him couldn't help but feel like his wages needed to match the inflation rate.

After all, he could at best earn around 500 to 700 sp per match on average which practically made him a beggar in the eyes of the system. Thus, he felt the urge to pick up a megaphone and start marching down the system's virtual streets and protest for an increase in his SP wages. That was only a passing thought though as he saw no need to stress himself out over things he couldn't afford, plus it's not like he minded learning skills the normal way.

A perfect example is his set piece skills which he spent gruelling hours perfecting and optimizing for use in different situations. The Bronze Heavy artillery skill only came later when he realised the limitation in

power that his growing body had in long-range shots. It was more of a security measure so that he wouldn't over-exert his body trying to put power into a shot.

{It is what it is Rakim, don't worry though future quests will have more lucrative rewards probably.}

~~~

[Sunday 18/08/2019, 12:15, Location: Ciudad Deportiva de Paterna Valencia]

[Matteo Smith Pov]

Matteo drummed his fingers on the glass table, his gaze shifting between the sparkling water in front of him and the distant outline of the training pitches. A cluster of first-team players jogged in unison, their laughter carried faintly by the breeze through the open window as they went through extra training. He'd been out there once, wearing the first team's colours, even if only for a fleeting fifteen minutes against Alavés. That moment felt more like a tease now—a cruel glimpse of a dream slipping further out of reach.

Oliver Burke, seated across from him, leaned back in his chair, his tailored suit almost too pristine for the informal lounge setting. His phone buzzed on the table, almost constantly as his busy schedule continued to call for his attention. Matteo's restlessness wasn't lost on him as his client had been irritated since he got here.

"Matteo," Oliver began, his voice steady but tinged with concern, "you've been quiet since I got here. What's going on?"

Matteo sighed, running a hand through his tousled dark hair. "What's going on?" he repeated, his tone heavy with sarcasm. "What's going on is that I'm rotting on the depth chart, or worse, not even making the squad. Meanwhile, Rakim whom you pitted me against to boost your agency's visibility debuts for Leverkusen delivering an assist and scores. Did you see the highlights?"

Oliver's lips curved into a thin smile. "Of course I did. He's on a run nothing more, you are a special forward, Matteo. I wouldn't have invested in you if I didn't believe in your talent more than his now, would I?"

Matteo's eyes narrowed at Oliver, his fingers curling into fists on the table. "Belief doesn't get me minutes on the pitch, Oliver. Belief doesn't put me in the headlines or get scouts to notice me. Belief doesn't get me out of this reserve hellhole while he's out there basking in the spotlight."

Oliver leaned forward, his calm exterior still intact, but there was a flicker of annoyance in his eyes. "Patience, Matteo. You're eighteen. Do you know how many players would kill to be in your position? At Valencia, no less? Maxi Gómez won't last forever; his style doesn't even suit Valencia's long-term play. You just need to bide your time."

"Bide my time?" Matteo barked, pushing his chair back slightly. "That's what they've been telling me for months. Meanwhile, Rakim at barely 16 receives more trust from his team than I do at 18. He's out there taking chances and making a name for himself. The same Rakim who, by the way, you fumbled after he got shot, now the fans think I'm a joke because of your media shenanigans,"

Chapter 362 362 Poke The Bear

Oliver's composed demeanour cracked slightly, his jaw tightening as he straightened in his chair. "You think I fumbled Rakim?" His voice dropped, cold and cutting. "I made Rakim what he is. I pulled him out of obscurity that is the US and put him in the spotlight. Before me all they said about him was his descent for a player from the US now they call him a genius. That was all me, ME don't you forget that!"

"Without me, you'd still be languishing in England trying to catch the attention of some feeder team or academy so show some respect!" he continued now staring dangerously into the eyes of Mateo daring him to refute his words.

The room fell silent except for the faint hum of the air conditioner. Matteo's glare met Oliver's icy stare, neither willing to back down. Matteo's knuckles whitened as he gripped the edge of the table, while Oliver's perfectly polished shoe tapped an impatient rhythm against the tiled floor.

Matteo broke the silence, his voice low but seething with frustration. "Respect? You want respect? Respect is earned, Oliver. I came to Spain to play football, not sit around waiting for your 'long-term strategy' to pay off. Maybe you should've stayed focused on me instead of spending all your energy turning Rakim into your golden boy."

Oliver's jaw tightened further, but his expression remained composed. "You think I'm not focused on you? Every call I make, and every connection I leverage is to position you for success. But this isn't a fairy tale, Matteo. Football doesn't work like that. You don't just skip the line because you're impatient."

Matteo laughed bitterly, leaning back in his chair and crossing his arms. "You know what I don't care just get me playing time, you always brag about what a good agent you are so get it done. If you can't I'll find someone who can and I won't participate in whatever convoluted strategy you have with Nike until my needs are met,"

Oliver rose slowly, his movements deliberate, his expression unflinching. "Fine, I'll get it done but don't go crying to me when you fall on your face. I'll be the first to drop you if you don't perform." The middle-aged agent stated with a stern look as he made his exit looking as elegant as ever. However, if Matteo were able to hear his chaotic thoughts, he would have run for his life regretting ever signing with this man.



~~~

[Saturday 24/08/2019, Merkur Spiel-arena, Location: Düsseldorf]

"Wow that's like twice as many fans as in the last match," I said out loud as I took a second to look at the stands of the Spiel-arena that were now filling up. The atmosphere was already heating up for this north-western derby of Germany. The arena could fill a total of 54,600 people around 25,000 more than our home arena despite us being the more successful team.

It wasn't odd to get my head around tho after finding out that the stadium was a multipurpose one. The owners would host concerts, wrestling shows and all sorts of entertainment events in the off-season or whenever Fortuna Düsseldorf wasn't playing at home. If you think about it felt like the investors didn't believe in the team from the get-go when they built the stadium.

'I wouldn't be surprised if they earn more money the sooner the team gets kicked out of competitions, opening up timeslots for other avenues,' I thought to myself as I watched some of the Düsseldorf fans waving their team's flags with passion.

"Yo Florida, come. It's time to go in. Coach will start growing hair if we keep him waiting," Wendell exclaimed from the sidelines with a bright smile, chuckling at his own joke, completely ignoring the fact that Bosz was standing a few yards behind him.

Coach Bosz, however, didn't look amused. His sharp eyes were fixed on Wendell, his arms crossed tightly over his chest, but there was a flicker of amusement hiding beneath his otherwise stern expression. He

was already used to this Brazilian defender's antics who seemed to find one or more outlets for all that energy he is carrying.

"Cut the jokes, Wendell," Bosz said in his usual calm but firm tone. "Get in the changing rooms or you can join me on the bench" Wendell gave a mock salute, before I joined him and the rest of our team, heading down the tunnel towards the away locker room.

The hum of the crowd faded into muffled echoes as we entered the tunnel. The concrete walls filled with Düsseldorf portraits and murals gave a rather rich sense of history. None of this mattered to Wendell though as he was still grinning, not at all feeling the pressure of the North Germany derby we are about to play.

"You nervous, Florida?" he asked, as he proceeded to place an arm around my neck just as we entered the locker room.

"Not a chance, plus I'm sitting on the bench, so maybe you should be more nervous so I can get to play," I replied half joking and half serious hoping that the game is balanced enough that I get some playing time.

Wendell let out a loud laugh, drawing the attention of a few teammates already lacing up their boots. "Man, you've got jokes today, Florida. But don't get too comfy on that bench. You never know when Bosz might throw you in. These games can get crazy fast."

"Just wait—I'll score a banger and dedicate it to you, yeah?" he stated with a bright smile. "Sure," I shot back, rolling my eyes. "I'll make sure the bench has a good view just don't mess up your highlight reel won't survive it." I shrugged off his arm and found the spot that the team's staff had prepared for me changing directly into the match jersey.

The smell of liniment and freshly laundered kits mixed with the faint tang of sweat already hanging in the air. Today we donned our black away though I won't get to show mine off unless I actually get subbed on. Looking around me the team buzzed with energy the team buzzed with energy, the loud ones were hyping each other up with jokes and playful shoves.

While the more serious ones did their best to get into go mode as they listened to music taking a moment to focus on the moment. Cleats scraped against the tiled floor as players adjusted their gear. Coach Bosz entered soon after, his presence commanding an instant shift in the atmosphere.

"Alright, settle down," he called, his voice cutting through the chatter. He placed a folder on the table in the centre of the room and opened it, revealing the lineup and tactical board. On it was the positional play that he had announced a day earlier in training with different priorities to watch out for.

"This is a big one, boys. Not just because it's a derby, but because it sets the tone for the rest of the season. We put on a shaky performance against Paderborn last week and this is the perfect stage to give not only the fans but everyone in the Leverkusen organisation some needed belief in this season. Now, listen up."

The room fell silent except for the occasional creak of chairs as players leaned in. Bosz pointed to the board where he had already marked out Düsseldorf's formation. "They're lining up in a 4-4-2," he began, his tone steady. "Compact, disciplined, and dangerous on the counterattack. That means we'll have to stay sharp defensively, especially in transitions. Their wingers are quick, and their forwards don't need many chances to convert."

He paused, looking around the room. "We're taking a more cautious 4-1-4-1 formation Control the midfield, meet them head-on, overload the flanks, and stretch their backline." He continued going through the pre-match tactics going into more detail with some of the players giving them advice on what he wanted them to watch out for. "Wendell, I want you overlapping with Bailey on the left use some of that energy you have on the field."

Bosz clapped his hands after giving the final instructions to some more defenders who would need to be extra focused on the counter today. "Right. Gear up. We hit the pitch in five." There wasn't a loud cheer, but everyone was pumped for the match knowing exactly what was at stake, but they simply acted like the professional they were.

As the players dispersed to make final adjustments, Wendell nudged me with a grin. "You hear that, Florida? Coach said you're important, well he said everyone but you everyone right? Maybe they'll even let you take a corner if we're five-nil up."

[Ding mission: 'Poke the Bear' Successfully Triggered]

Chapter 363 363 Goat MC

[Saturday 24/08/2019, Merkur Spiel-arena, Location: Düsseldorf]

"WELCOME TO THE MERKUR SPIEL-ARENA Ladies and Gentlemen, today we have a rivalry, but if you ask any of the two teams' fans it's more like a grudge match," Derek Rae stated with excitement as he did an audible with his commentary intro. "I'm your host Derek Rae and with me is my good friend Stewart Robson,"

"Indeed, Derek this isn't some random derby between cities over economic and industrial competition no it's much deeper than that dating back to 1288 when Düsseldorf was but a village and farmers from the area fought against the archbishop of Cologne. Now this rivalry has taken new shape on this field ready for the two teams to do battle on the fan's behalf." Stewart Robson interjected matching his co-host's energy as he put his forced team bonding session to the local history museum to use.

The camera panned over the vibrant stands, a sea of red and white on one side and black and red on the other, as fans waved flags and roared in anticipation. The atmosphere was electric, with pyrotechnics already erupting from the ultras in the Leverkusen end.

"Look at that scene, Stewart," Derek continued. "This is what football is all about. Passion, history, and a bit of animosity—make for the perfect setting."

"It certainly does," Stewart agreed. "And both these teams have everything to play in, this is week 2 of the 2019 Bundesliga season, and today's match-up at the Merkur Spiel-arena is between Düsseldorf and Leverkusen." Following his words almost as if planned the players emerged from the tunnel, followed by a massive roar from the crowd as their emotions reached their peak.

"Wow that's 45 thousand people ready for a ball game, let's have a look at the lineups." Derek Rae stated the moment he watched the camera start to pan over the players who now stood in line the stand for the anthem. As the camera swept across the players lined up on the pitch, Derek Rae launched into his commentary.

"Let's start with the home team, Fortuna Düsseldorf, lining up in a traditional 4-4-2 formation. In goal, Zack Steffen, a man who's quickly making a name for himself as a dependable shot-stopper. Ahead of him, a backline anchored by Kaan Ayhan and André Hoffmann—two centre-backs who will need to contain Leverkusen's potent attack."

"They certainly will, Derek," Stewart Robson chimed in. "Ayhan, in particular, has been solid in the air, but it's the flanks I'd keep an eye on. Niko Gießelmann and Matthias Zimmermann will have their work cut out trying to limit Leon Bailey and Karim Bellarabi on the wings. Those two are blisteringly fast."

"And speaking of pace, Düsseldorf's midfield is packed with energy," Derek continued. "Matthias Suttner and Erik Thommy on the wings provide the width, while Alfredo Morales and Lewis Baker will be key in trying to disrupt Leverkusen's rhythm in the centre of the park."

"But Derek, the real threat for Düsseldorf lies up top," Stewart added. "Rouwen Hennings and Kenan Karaman are a classic strike partnership. Hennings is the fox-in-the-box type, while Karaman adds a bit of unpredictability. If they can link up effectively, Düsseldorf might just have a chance to pull something special off here today."

"And now to the visitors, Bayer Leverkusen," Derek Rae transitioned smoothly as the camera panned to the Leverkusen squad, standing poised and confident in their red and black kits. "Lining up in a modern 4-1-4-1 formation, we have Lukas Hrádecký between the sticks, who will certainly be looking to concede less than last week as he builds on his team's victory."

"Absolutely, Derek," Stewart agreed. "And take a look at that backline. The Bender twins—Lars on the right and Sven at centre-back—are as experienced as they are disciplined. Add Jonathan Tah's physicality and Wendell's attacking instincts from left-back, and you've got a defence that's tough to break down but capable of joining the attack in an instant."

"In midfield, the engine is Charles Aránguiz," Derek continued. "He'll be sitting deep, acting as the pivot and shielding the backline while trying to activate the attacking quartet ahead of him."

"That quartet is frightening, Derek," Stewart interjected. "On the left, Leon Bailey who will be looking to add to his goal tally from last weekend, he is a player who can turn the game on its head with his speed and trickery."

"You're absolutely right, and with Kerem Demirbay and Kai Havertz, two players with exceptional vision and creativity he will have a lot of opportunity to showcase his skills today." Derek agreed before

adding, "On the right flank Karim Boz's has fielded Bellarabi—another speedster who loves to cut inside and take on defenders. Someone should probably tell him that he is coaching football and not a track team given how much pace he has stockpiled in this squad"

"hahaha I must say I agree with you Derek, this team has no doubt got the fastest attacking line in the league. With names like Bailey and Diaby in the squad and I haven't seen Rakim sprint yet but we both know how explosive the wunderkind can be," Stewart stated with a hearty laugh as he failed to think of a team with a faster attacking quartet in European football.

"Finally leading the line for Leverkusen is their lone striker, Kevin Volland," Derek added. "A striker who's as hardworking as he is clinical. He's the kind of player who can drop deep, link up with midfield, and still be in the right place at the right time to score. A modern striker in the truest sense."

"Absolutely, Derek," Stewart continued, "Volland's work ethic is something that stands out. He won't just be waiting for the ball to come to him—he'll be active all over the pitch, making runs into space and pulling defenders out of position."

Derek nodded in agreement. "A player who can lead the line so effectively yet still play like a creative midfielder when needed. And he'll have plenty of options around him, with Demirbay's sharp passing and Havertz's ability to play between the lines. It's a dynamic attack that Düsseldorf's defence will need to be on high alert for."

"Speaking of defence," Stewart said, "Düsseldorf will need to find a way to limit Leverkusen's threat on the counter. Bailey and Bellarabi's pace is always a danger when Leverkusen breaks quickly. If Düsseldorf isn't careful, they could be exposed, especially with those two flying down the wings."

"That's right, Stewart," Derek added. "The pace and movement Leverkusen brings could cause nightmares for Düsseldorf's backline. But Düsseldorf will also look to counterattack quickly, especially with players like Karaman and Thommy who can stretch the field."

"That's where the key battle will lie, isn't it? The midfield," Stewart mused. "If Düsseldorf's Morales and Baker can break up Leverkusen's rhythm and force turnovers, it'll give their forwards a chance to exploit those gaps in the Leverkusen defence. But I can't see Aránguiz allowing that to happen without a fight."

Derek smiled. "It's going to be a real chess match in the middle of the park. And with the speed of both teams, I think this could turn into a high-tempo, end-to-end affair."

Stewart laughed, "If you like goals and plenty of action, this is the match for you." The camera cut to a wide shot of the pitch as the players took their positions. The tension was palpable, and the fans were on the edge of their seats, eagerly anticipating the first whistle.

Derek Rae spoke up again. "Here we go, folks! It's Düsseldorf versus Leverkusen—two teams with plenty of firepower. The battle for supremacy starts now!" With that, the whistle blew, and the game kicked off as the camera zoomed in slightly to the figure of Volland passing the ball back to Havertz from the centre line.

Chapter 364 364 VAR

[1st minute]

Volland rolled the ball back to Havertz, who immediately controlled it with precision, scanning the field for movement. Leverkusen's midfield pushed up quickly, with Wendell overlapping on the left, his pace already a threat to Düsseldorf's defensive line. Havertz played a sharp diagonal pass to Bellarabi on the right, but Morales intercepted with a perfectly timed sliding tackle, drawing early applause from the Düsseldorf fans.

Düsseldorf immediately countered. Morales scooped the ball forward into space for Karaman to chase. Karaman outpaced Sven Bender, cutting inside towards the box, but his shot lacked power, allowing Hrádecký to make a comfortable save. Regaining control, the red lions worked to retain it using their superior quality to play keep away.

[8th minute]

Leverkusen's attack was relentless. Volland, operating as a lone striker, dropped deep to link up with his midfield, drawing the Düsseldorf defenders out of position. Spotting the space created, Bellarabi sprinted down the right flank, receiving a well-timed through ball from Demirbay.

Bellarabi surged past Gießelmann and whipped a dangerous cross into the box. Rouwen Hennings, tracking back, managed a vital header to clear the danger, but only as far as Havertz at the edge of the box. Havertz unleashed a first-time volley, but he couldn't bring it down enough and could only watch as the ball sailed just over the crossbar.

[13th Minute]

Düsseldorf seemed to find their rhythm as they worked the ball patiently upfield. Morales, sharp and alert, intercepted a loose pass from Havertz in midfield when he was forced to make a quick pass. Not hesitating the midfielder immediately launched an attack.

He passed it short to Baker, who turned under pressure and cleverly threaded the ball between Aránguiz and Bailey to Tommy on the right wing. Tommy wasted no time. He pushed the ball forward with his first touch and ran at Wendell, who seemed wary of committing too soon. Tommy executed a quick step-over followed by a sharp cut to his right, leaving Wendell off balance. Spotting Hennings making a run towards the near post, Tommy curled a high, looping cross into the box.

Hennings timed his jump perfectly, rising above Tah and connecting with a glancing header. The ball arched toward the bottom left corner of the goal. Hrádecký wasn't to be beaten though as he kicked his right leg out, connecting just enough to tip the ball wide of the post. The Düsseldorf crowd erupted in cheers, applauding their team's attack while the visitors breathed a sigh of relief.

[19th Minute]

"Well, Derek," Stewart Robson chimed in, his tone analytical, "Düsseldorf has certainly shown they won't sit back and let Leverkusen dictate the pace. Their wide play has been particularly dangerous, especially through Tommy. Wendell's struggling to keep up."

Derek Rae nodded, his excitement evident. "Absolutely, Stewart. They may not have the same level of individual talent as Leverkusen, but they're making up for it with clever movement and rapid transitions."

As they spoke, Leverkusen built from the back. Jonathan Tah sprayed a diagonal ball to Bellarabi on the right, who brought it down with a deft first touch. The winger drove forward, his pace electrifying. Gießelmann backpedalled desperately as Bellarabi shifted gears, cutting inside. Spotting Volland peeling off his marker at the edge of the box, Bellarabi slipped a low pass toward him.

Volland, with his back to goal, controlled the ball and immediately laid it off to Havertz. The young playmaker's first touch was exquisite, setting himself up for a curling shot aimed for the top corner. Steffen, however, was equal to it, leaping acrobatically to tip the ball over the bar.

"That's world-class from Steffen!" Derek exclaimed. "Havertz thought he'd buried that one!"

"Not just him Derek I and the away supporters already saw the ball in the back of the net," Stewart responded as the camera panned over the figure of a 10-year-old boy in the stands holding his head in disbelief.

[25th Minute]

From the resulting corner, Demirbay delivered a teasing ball into the six-yard box. Sven Bender rose highest, but his header was blocked by a wall of Düsseldorf defenders. The ball pinballed around the box, chaos unfolding as both teams scrambled for control.

Finally, Hoffmann booted it clear, drawing relieved cheers from the home crowd. The clearance turned into a counterattack as Morales surged forward, carrying the ball past the halfway line. He spotted Karaman darting into space losing Aránguiz and Tah who had sat back during the corner. With a perfectly lofted through ball, Morales sent Karaman through on goal.

The crowd held its breath as Karaman sprinted forward, as the race between him and Hrádecký was on. Aránguiz and Tah chased after him, but the striker turned on the jets leaving the two in the dust. The Ball descended around a few yards into the final third as both the striker and keeper pounced.

However, despite Hrádecký having the advantage of seeing the ball coming all the way he wasn't comfortable with his legs. After all, not every German keeper can be like Neuer, possessing better ball-control skills than some professional players. That proved to be Hradecky's Achilles heel in this confrontation as he hesitated whether to receive the ball or boot it away.

Karaman didn't though immediately swinging his foot mid-lunge doing just enough to nudge it past the keeper. Time stood still for a moment as it looked like the two would collide. They both held eye contact as the keeper seemed to make up his mind to stop him at all costs.

It wasn't meant to be so as the striker gracefully bypassed him the moment he landed putting his fox-like agility to good use. Exploding past the keeper whose momentum sent him sprawling to the ground he latched onto the loose ball. Entering the box unhindered at speed he comfortably slotted the ball into the open net.

The stadium erupted into deafening cheers as Karaman's clinical finish put Düsseldorf ahead. The striker raced off to the corner flag in celebration, pointing to the home crowd as his teammates rushed to embrace him. The Düsseldorf bench erupted with joy, their manager clapping furiously on the sideline.

Derek Rae's voice boomed over the din. "And Düsseldorf takes the lead! Karaman capitalizes on his first chance to beat Hrádecký, and you have to say, the striker made it look effortless."

As the jubilant Düsseldorf players surrounded Karaman, the Leverkusen players surrounded the referee, gesturing frantically. Wendell and Lars Bender were at the forefront, their voices raised as they pointed toward the screen in the corner of the stadium.

"Looks like they're asking for a VAR check here," Stewart Robson observed. "They seem to think the striker was offside in the buildup."

"That would be the only saving grace they can hope for after that awful breakdown in defence that allowed the striker to spear head that counter." Derek chimed in as he watched the ref blow his whistle motioning a square before he raced off to the sidelines.

The referee sprinted toward the sideline, his finger pressed against his earpiece as the Düsseldorf crowd erupted into a chorus of boos. The players on both sides stood still, breaths held in anticipation. Cameras zoomed in on Karaman, his expression calm but his eyes betraying a hint of nervousness.

"Now this is where modern football gets interesting," Derek Rae remarked. "A brilliant goal, but it's all down to the lines now. Was Karaman ahead of the last defender when Morales played that ball?"

Stewart Robson leaned into his mic. "It's a tight one, Derek. Tah and Aránguiz were sprinting back, and Karaman timed his run brilliantly. But it only takes a fraction of a second for the flag to go up—or for VAR to rule it out." As the referee reached the monitor, the giant screen in the stadium displayed a replay of the moment Morales lofted the ball forward.

The image froze, and the lines were drawn. Karaman's foot appeared just a hair in front of Tah, but his outstretched arms kept the striker on side by a hand's width. The referee nodded sharply and turned back toward the field, pointing decisively toward the centre circle. The goal stood.

The Düsseldorf fans erupted into thunderous cheers, their voices drowning out the protests of the Leverkusen players. Karaman clenched his fists in celebration and waved to the roaring crowd. Morales jogged over to him, patting him on the back as the two shared a triumphant grin.

"Well, there you have it!" Derek Rae exclaimed. "Karaman's goal stands, and Düsseldorf leads 1-0. Justice for the home side as VAR confirms the striker timed his run to perfection."

"Absolutely, Derek," Stewart Robson replied. "It's the kind of decision that can swing momentum. Leverkusen will need to regroup quickly because Düsseldorf is growing in confidence."

Chapter 365 365 Wake Up Call

[28th Minute]

Leverkusen restarted the game with urgency. Volland, visibly frustrated, clapped his hands, urging his teammates forward. Wendell advanced up the left flank, combining neatly with Bailey to bypass Thommy. The Jamaican winger took off, his electric pace leaving Düsseldorf's right side scrambling. Bailey's quick step-over and burst of speed brought him to the edge of the box, where he unleashed a low-driven shot aimed for the far corner after gaining separation from Zimmermann Düsseldorf's right back.

Steffen reacted like lightning, diving to the ground to his right to palm the ball away. He wasn't given a chance to react and could only let his muscle memory do the job and luckily for him, he took his daily training seriously. However, the rebound spilled dangerously into the six-yard box, but Hoffmann came to the rescue sliding in heroically clearing it just before Volland could tap it home.

"We were wondering how long it would take them to respond, and we didn't have to wait long, what an attacking sequence from the Jamaican." Derek Rae exclaimed following that attack fully engaged in the game.

"Indeed, that was a needed response for them after just concerning a goal. However, let's not forget Steffen's outstanding reflexes that keep his team ahead!" Stewart Robson chimed in. "And Hoffmann with the follow-up—Düsseldorf holding firm under immense pressure!"

[35th Minute]

The Red Lions clearly did not pay attention to Albert Einstein in school as they did not let up no matter how much they failed to score. They trusted their training and tactics launching attacks down the wings by switching tempo at a moment's notice. Quite a few times they had caught the Düsseldorf defence off

guard when one of their attackers decided to break through setting off a chain reaction from the rest of the team.

One such moment happened in the 35th minute when Havertz took control of the ball just at the edge of the final quarter. Red jerseys stood in his way causing him to hesitate for a moment but in the end, he decided to risk it. Flicking the ball to his mid-field partner Demirbay he charged forward in between the Düsseldorf defence.

Before they could react, he had received the return pass and was snaking past the figure of Baker. Having torn through the heart of Düsseldorf's midfield, he gained a little space to operate, and he did not waste it. Proving why he was for a time considered one of the best up-and-coming Attacking midfielders, he threaded a perfectly weighted pass to Bellarabi on the right.

The winger escaped his marker latching onto the ball a couple of yards ahead of the byline allowing him to dart into the box. Demirbay didn't bother breaking into the box as he squared the ball across the face of the goal. Volland lunged for it but couldn't quite make contact. The ball skidded past him to Wendell, who had sprinted forward to join the attack.

Wendell lined up a shot, only for Gießelmann to throw his body in front of it, deflecting the ball wide for a corner. "Düsseldorf's defenders are putting their bodies on the line here," Stewart observed. "It's chaotic, but it's working."

From the corner, Demirbay whipped in a vicious inswinger. Tah rose above the crowd, his header crashing off the crossbar with a deafening thud. The ball ricocheted out, and Düsseldorf scrambled to clear their lines, the crowd roaring their encouragement.

[42nd Minute]

The match took another dramatic turn as Düsseldorf sought to double their lead. Karaman, still brimming with confidence, collected the ball deep in his own half and surged forward. His blend of strength and agility allowed him to shrug off Aránguiz's challenge and power through midfield.

Karaman spotted Hennings making a diagonal run into the box. With a deft outside-of-the-foot pass, Karaman sent the ball curling around Tah and into Hennings' path. The striker controlled it expertly, setting himself up for a thunderous strike.

Hrádecký was equal to the challenge, closing down the angel and diving to his left to parry the shot away. The rebound fell to Thommy, who fired on goal, only for Lars Bender to block it with a desperate slide. The ball pinged out of the box, and Leverkusen launched a counterattack.

[45th+2 Minute]

As the first half drew to a close, Leverkusen nearly found the equalizer. Havertz orchestrated the move, dropping deep to collect the ball and turning just as fast to initiate an attack. He slipped a deep pass to Bailey, who cut inside at the corner of the 18-yard box and unleashed a curling shot destined for the top corner.

Steffen, once again, reacted with cat-like instincts timing his jump just right but he wasn't needed, and he realized that as well pulling back his outstretched hand. As expected, the ball sailed over the frame of the goal heading into the stands. The referee barely waited for the keeper to land on the ground as he blew his whistle causing the Düsseldorf fans to rise to their feet in applauding their team's performance.

"And that's halftime!" Derek announced. "Düsseldorf leads 1-0 thanks to a brilliant solo effort from Karaman, but Leverkusen has looked increasingly dangerous. This match is far from over, Stewart."

"Absolutely, Derek. Leverkusen has had their chances, but they'll need to be more clinical in the second half. As for Düsseldorf, they've shown grit and determination, but can they maintain this level of intensity?"

The players trudged off the pitch, Düsseldorf buoyed by their lead, while Leverkusen looked determined to turn things around. The second half promised to be a battle of tactics, endurance, and nerves.

~~~

[Away Looker Room]

The atmosphere in the Leverkusen locker room was tense but the players remained professional doing their best to regain their energy. Most players sat on the benches, sweat dripping from their brows, as they chugged down some water. Some leaned forward, staring blankly at the floor, while others fidgeted with their shin guards or towels. The dull hum of muffled crowd noise seeped through the walls, but no one was idle enough to listen.

Frustration was the only emotion and thought in everyone's minds as they couldn't understand why they struggled to convert. They dominated possession and did their best to create threatening attacks, but it was the execution that let them down. The fact they were 1 goal down didn't even bother them, knowing they could easily come back from this deficit.

Peter Bosz stood at the front of the room, his face stern and his eyes scanning the group of players. The noise from the stadium outside faded into the background as he spoke, his tone sharp yet focused.

"Listen up," Bosz began, his voice carrying an edge of calm authority. "We're still in this. We've controlled the game, and we've been unlucky in the final third. But I need you to make your own luck out there and put that Dam ball into their goal!" His voice was calm to begin with but to words the end he was shouting his final words surprising all present in the room.

"You guys are professional and your entire life revolves around putting a ball into the back of the net. So, at some point being unlucky is no longer a good enough excuse for a forward." He continued as he stared at the group of forwards which included the entire midfield line and Volland. "You don't see L. Hrádecký blaming his luck when someone scores on him so go and make something happen or let me know and I'll bring someone on who will."

The group of forwards gulped, feeling the tension suddenly reach another level, as they were used to the laid-back nature of their coach. Seeing him so intensely demanding them to perform wasn't something they were expecting. The pressure was defiantly on and none of them dared to voice any form of displeasure at being suddenly singled out.

The room was heavy with silence after Bosz's fiery words, each player feeling the weight of his expectations. The usually calm and collected coach had just shifted gears into a mode they rarely saw, and it hit them all hard. The team knew Bosz was right. They had dominated the first half in every department except for the one that mattered most — the scoreline.

Peter Bosz took a step back, his eyes locking onto key players. His gaze lingered on Volland, Demirbay, Havertz, and Bailey, each one pivotal in the attack but guilty of missed chances or poor decisions in the final third.

"We're better than this," Bosz continued, his voice now composed but still carrying a sense of urgency. "Volland, you need to be more selfish in front of goal. You're being too careful out there and the defense doesn't fear you. As a matter of fact, they treat you like a friend who is just there for a visit, you've got to remind everyone why you deserve to be Leverkusen's main striker."

Chapter 366 366 No Fun,

[Ding mission: 'Poke the Bear' Successfully Triggered]

- Your Teammate has thrown the gauntlet questioning whether you'd make a difference even if you entered the field. More importantly, he put into question your status as the singularity candidate.

Requirements: Prove to everyone watching that you are different and fully embrace your Monica as the special one

Rewards: Mentality Trait grade???

Punishment: System shut down for a duration of 156 weeks and 5 days

(Note: Every talented player who becomes great has one single trait that makes them different from regular mortals who share the green grass with them. Unleash your desire for glory, let loose your fighting spirit, wreak havoc on the field and let me witness your Ego...(ahem) Your performance.)

---

Rakim had been staring at this floating notification since the moment he received it. Even during the first half he hardly realized that his team had gone behind as his brain fired off a variety of thoughts. 'Prove myself? What does it think I've been doing my entire life,' he thought to himself as he remained seated on the bench while the rest of the subs took the field to warm up.

If not for the fact his right boot would occasionally tap the ground rhythmically people might have thought, he was asleep. Especially since they couldn't see his face as his Titan-Fit hood covered his features. 'Ever since coming back and escaping that... Even lost some friends because I didn't have time to go to parties... After the shooting, my first thoughts and actions were to get up and work on getting back on the field,'

His thoughts continued to avalanche slowly grating his rationality the longer he lingered on it. No matter how he thought about it he found the system to be unreasonable after all he had given the sport 90% of his time. If not for his family making sure he took time to enjoy life and relax he'd probably be single-mindedly training to become better every waking moment.

Maybe that was the problem he'd grown too comfortable, heck he'd even started a relationship something his past life self couldn't even imagine. 'Yes, why have I grown soft, completing missions given is the only route to survive everything else is just a shackle,'

{You need to snap out,} Eva stated for the umpteenth time but once again she received no response from her host. His thoughts seemed to be spiraling out of control and for some reason they were drawing on his negative experiences from his past life.

Those memories had been suppressed when he had first returned to the past so that he could develop properly. After all, a child raised a child soldier would be indoctrinated to the point where he is only a shell of what he could have been. So, even though most of those gruesome memories were deleted the emotions behind them still remained.

At this very moment, they were stoking his feelings of desperation (not being enough), which became prevalent as an invisible dark green aura enveloped him. {Why are you doing this?} Eva asked to no one in particular but she got a response, nonetheless. [You have been too soft in your mission and have failed him,] was the response she received from the cold voice of the system.

{he was doing well though, he became a light in this world and an inspiration to millions of kids around the globe. Don't act like you haven't seen it.}

[I have but you were supposed to help him deal with his trauma Just because it's suppressed, and he is doing well doesn't mean he won't be haunted by his past actions.]

[You were supposed to guide him to face it, but you have been too indulgent. He can't go to therapy in this life for what he did in his past life, but you are easily qualified to help him overcome this burden.]

{{sigh} I know you're right... but I thought I had more time,}

{Seeing my #123\$423£5665 so happy made me want to let him live in that bubble a little while longer,}

[That is of no consequence. Now, whatever happens will be a result of your negligence. I knew you weren't ready for this,] The system continued to scold Eva wanting to make sure that she understood where she went wrong. She had gotten too close to her host and while that may not be bad failing to be strict enough to do her duties is.

{I'm sorry I'll do better} Eva said after five minutes of being scolded by the cold mechanical voice of the system. It had spoken more words in these 5 minutes than it had in the 10 years Rakim had been its host.

[I'm sorry but if he fails to satisfy this mission you will also be forcefully put to sleep for the 3-year duration along with the system,] Its cold voice stated showing no mercy to the repenting Eva as it stated its verdict.

'Hey you, what did you just say?' Rakim's inner voice suddenly sounded surprising to both Eva and the system as they'd expected him to continue spiralling trying to find the answer to whatever was holding him back.

However, upon hearing the system's verdict to Eva his brain received the jolt it needed to gain a semblance of clarity in the chaos that was his emotions. 'I heard you right didn't I,... you are going to lock her up if I don't fulfil your stupid mission right?' he asked once again as his bright green eyes glowed with an intensity that sent a chill to his nearby teammates who once again joined him on the bench.

Paulinho who was about to start a conversation with him, wisely left him alone before proceeding to say a short prayer. The reason for the prayer would forever remain between him and God but one thing is for sure the Brazilian striker remained as silent as a church mouse for the remainder of the match.

[Indee...]

'Shut up! Just be quiet for a moment, Kinda trying to think over here' He interrupted her response as he tried to get a grip on the tempest of thoughts and emotions that were trying to grab his attention. "I think I get it now," he whispered to himself as he pulled his hood further down and his tapping foot suddenly stopped on cue.

'I'm not sure what you expect to see but with the way, I'm feeling right I'll either do something monstrous or this will blow up in my face majorly,' he stated inwardly where both the system and Eva remained silent in the same way a parent would wait for a child to finish their tantrum before acting.

'You know I don't like this feeling of not knowing how I'll play despite knowing what I've drilled into my muscle memory. What's more now you are telling me Eva will be locked up along with you if I fail... I really don't like this feeling, It's no fun,'

It's no fun was what he finally settled on as that was what football had become for him in his new life. He enjoyed working hard to learn a new move and getting better brought joy to him like nothing else. It's not like he didn't have other options as he is quite smart and could have pursued something normal but the euphoria, he got from drilling a ball just couldn't be matched.

However, this mission unlike the previous mission took all the joy from it, from the way he plays the game. The thought of losing Eva, the first voice he heard in this life and his biggest companion, only heightened that dread. 'I'm going to kill Wendell this is all his fault,' he thought to himself as he jumped up from the bench going on a jog to keep his body warm. The match had already resumed but none of that mattered to him as he tried to find a way to play his version of football with the imposed stakes.

"Yep, it's defiantly no fun,"

Chapter 367 367 Poke The Bear (2)

[60 Minute]

As the match clock ticked past the 60-minute mark, Leverkusen's head coach, Peter Bosz, decided to inject fresh energy into the game. The fourth official board displayed the numbers: 38 for 22. Karim Bellarabi jogged off the pitch, he tried his best to hide the frustration from his face, but it was easily discernable from the winger at his vantage point.

"Leverkusen are making the first changes of the game," Derek Rae observed from the commentary box. "Bellarabi makes way for Rex, and it seems Nadiem Amiri is also coming on, replacing Kerem Demirbay."

Stewart Robson nodded in agreement. "Bosz had to act. They've had 15 minutes to implement his halftime instructions, but it's not yielding results. Seven shots on target and nothing to show for it. Steffen's goalkeeping has been exceptional, and the woodwork has been equally unkind to them."

"Indeed," Derek replied. "It's almost as if Fortuna have a 13th man out there. The posts have been as active as both keepers combined."

Derek lightheartedly commented before focusing on Rakim dapping up Bellarabi who was exiting the field. Closing his eyes momentarily, he was calm at this very moment, not even bothering to tie up his loose dreads. Bowed his head before pointing both index fingers to the sky, something he rarely did. When he did it was like his way of asking God to watch over him as he was not in the right mind state to care about anything else other than ending the game.

"What can we expect from these substitutions, particularly with Amiri joining Aránguiz in a double pivot, shifting Leverkusen to a 4-2-3-1 formation?" Derek inquired from his partner as the two entered the field receiving a lacklustre reception from the away fans who struggled to remain upbeat.

"Amiri brings a dynamic presence to the midfield," Stewart explained. "He's known for his ability to drive forward with the ball, break lines, and his vision should help to unlock that Düsseldorf defensive formation. As for Rakim his energy and creativity could be just the catalyst Leverkusen need,"

The away fans, though subdued by the earlier missed opportunities and the current deficit, perked up at the sight of the changes. They had witnessed their team's dominance in possession and chances, yet the scoreboard remained unfavourable. In a derby, patience wears thin, and the supporters yearned for a breakthrough.



The fact they weren't booing them or jeering the home team was all the restraint they could muster, asking for more would only ignite a lion's den. The introduction of fresh legs and new ideas did however rekindle a flicker of hope among them.

Rakim Rex eased into his position on the right flank, jogging along the touchline to find his rhythm. The ball zipped around the midfield as Leverkusen probed for openings, their 4-2-3-1 formation already creating spaces that had been elusive in the first half. Nadiem Amiri's first touches were steady, linking well with Charles Aránguiz and Kai Havertz as they worked to stretch the Düsseldorf defence.

Rakim's first significant involvement came in the 66th minute. Wendell played a crisp diagonal pass, and Rakim took it down expertly with the outside of his boot, his touch immaculate as his dreads floated in the air. A quick feint sent Suttner lunging, and Rakim accelerated past him down the line. Not allowing Gießelmann to close him down he sent a whipped cross into the box with venom, forcing Hoffmann to clear awkwardly, but Volland couldn't capitalize on the loose ball as Steffen smothered it.

The away crowd murmured, sensing the spark Rakim brought to the flank, unlike Bellarabi who failed to get going throughout his tenure in the match. His directness was already causing problems for Düsseldorf's compact shape. It also surprised some of his teammates who are used to him being a little more delicate with it looking to connect with his teammates.

[68th Minute]

Leverkusen kept the pressure high, pinning Düsseldorf back into their own half. Rakim received another pass, this time from Havertz, with his back to goal. Morales immediately pressed him, eager to stamp authority on the young substitute. But Rakim spun away with a perfectly timed roulette, leaving Morales flat-footed and chasing shadows.

Rakim surged forward, cutting inside to draw in defenders before sliding a deft pass to Amiri, who unleashed a shot from the edge of the box. Steffen was equal to it, as he was able to see it all the way diving to his left to push the ball wide. Rakim followed the rebound, recovering possession and allowing him to twist past Hoffmann with ease, using a nimble set of footwork that blurred over the ball. However, the angle was too tight, and his shot clipped the outside of the post.

The frustration from the fans was evident, but Rakim remained eerily composed staring at the post and then his left puma boot for a second. "You good? Don't linger on that it happens to the best of us," Havertz stated with a calm smile as he draped an arm around his head messing with his hair lightly.

"The grass is a bit softer than at The BayArea my left boot slipped before my right hit the ball," He responded with a frown before jogging back to his position while exchanging a brief glance at Peter on the sidelines who was losing imagery hair. He didn't linger too long on it though as he was just warming up.

[70th Minute]

Now fully acclimated to the game, Rakim picked up the ball just past midfield. He wasted no time playing it safe after spotting an opportunity as he felt an adrenaline rush of joy he got whenever he dribbled allowing him to forget his worries. The crowd bristled as he started a dangerous run, his movements fluid as he used a stop-and-go mixed with an Elastico to ghost past Suttner again.

Cutting inside with a confident smile he evaded the oncoming Hoffmann as he looked to make something happen. But Morales had other ideas, just as he was about to pick up speed the midfielder lunged in with a reckless challenge from his blind spot, sweeping Rakim's legs out from under him. Rakim felt his vision come to a stop and felt as if he was moving in slow motion, a feeling he wasn't all too unfamiliar with.

However, usually, it was the defenders he dribbled past who moved slower than him, allowing him to dance past them. So, this feeling felt odd for him—not just odd, but as if someone had suddenly taken his superpower. Not able to change the outcome, Rakim's injury prevention training kicked in as his hands shot forward, prepared to brace for the impact of the fall.

The moment he realized that he had been taken down time resumed its normal pace and in the next second, he crashed to the ground. He performed a dive roll trying to break as much of the momentum of his speed coming to a sudden halt kicking up dirt and grass in the process. Rakim hit the turf hard, rolling twice before popping back to his knees.

The referee's whistle pierced the air as Rakim grimaced, rubbing his left shin. Luckily, he wasn't one to wear one-inch shin guards like most winners and his regular one had braced most of the impact. Just as he was preparing to check if he was hurt more than just by the initial impact, he felt a shadow standing over him. Looking up, he saw the figure of Morales standing over him, half his body was covered with dirt clearly indicating he was the one to foul him.

"Stop being bitch I hardly touched you, Team USA Baby," Morales jeered, his words dripping with disdain as he stood over him. Before Rakim could even react a figure in a black jersey arrived before him sending Morales stumbling back with a push. Tah wasn't playing games as he immediately got in the face of Morales instantly causing nearby players to converge on the two.

Chapter 368 368 Smile

[70th Minute Continued]

The referee sprinted over, his whistle-blowing with sharp urgency as players from both teams crowded around Morales and Tah. Hands gestured wildly, voices clashed, and the tension on the field reached its boiling point. Morales simply smirked, brushing dirt off his legs as he taunted both Tah and Rakim from behind Gießelmann.

"Calm down, Tah!" Lars shouted, pulling his teammate back before things escalated further. "It's not worth it." The referee held up his hands, demanding order as he reached into his pocket. A yellow card was brandished toward Morales, his smirk unwavering, while Tah was cautioned with a stern warning for his reaction. The tension on the field simmered as boos rained down from the home team as Leverkusen medical team came on the field.

Rakim, who was still sitting on the ground, didn't even notice their presence as his gaze remained locked on Morales. Thomas Muller the middle-aged doctor of the team and his assistant started checking him out wanting to make sure he was ok. However, the lack of response from him inadvertently caused their movements to pause.

"Kid, are you okay?" he asked as he handed him a bottle of water, finally managing to get the boy to look at him but quickly regretted it. His green eyes held an intensity that startled him slightly as it reminded him of his time treating Thailand when he treated a man who fought a tiger barehanded.

Both their gazes looked desolate as if nothing mattered at that moment other than the destruction they were about to cause. "Are you hurt anywhere?" He asked again only to receive a blank stare that told him his question was irrelevant. If he was hurt, he definitely wouldn't be sitting so calmly in front of him. Sighing he instructed his assistants to apply the cold spray at the affected area not expecting an answer from the Rakim right now.

"Hey Doc," Rakim suddenly spoke up, causing him to stop his action and look back into his bright green eyes. "Why does everyone keep trying me? Have I been too nice so far or do I seem like an easy target?" He asked the man in his mid-fifties his voice remaining calm and steady throughout making sure the doc understood his every syllable.

Dr. Thomas Muller hesitated, momentarily taken aback by Rakim's question. It wasn't the words themselves that surprised him, but the weight behind them—calm, deliberate, and edged with something that felt like a storm about to break. However, just as he was about to respond with something generic to placate the player in front of him his words caught in his throat. The intense gaze that locked in on him wasn't something a 16-year-old should be able to give off.

"Sigh it doesn't really matter just something that popped in my head, and I've been trying to shake. Thanks, I'm all good now," Rakim responded with a bright smile stopping Dr. Muller's train of thought. Before he could say something, the player was already getting up from the ground re-adjusting his shin guards.

The cold spray stung slightly as Rakim stood up, brushing off the attention from the medical team. But his mind was no longer on the impact of the foul that had sent him sprawling to the ground. He was somewhere else now—his focus, sharp as anger had begun to take hold of him, creeping into his every movement. He felt his entire vision blur as the red Düsseldorf jerseys were nothing more than shadows in his vision much like the monsters in his Titan-Fit advert.

~~~

[72nd minute]

The referee regained control of the match after giving out a few warnings, and in the end, he only had to book Morales. Leverkusen received a set-piece opportunity from around 25 yards out, a perfect indirect free-kick range. Havertz was standing over the ball with Aránguiz discussing what to do when Rakim joined them.

"You good?" Havertz asked him when he joined the huddle but only received a nod from the younger boy. "Don't linger on it, only lesser players resort to dirty plays like that when they can't stop you. Pay him back by scoring a couple of goals."

"Yeah, just don't get fouled again or the friendly giant might take someone's head off," Aránguiz stated from the side as he motioned to the figure of Tah in the box with a pissed expression. He was usually a friendly guy joking around in training when it was appropriate but was also fiercely protective of his teammates. He hadn't been the closest to Rakim when he was taken down, yet he was the first to defend him, nonetheless.

"Let me take it," Those were Rakim's first and only words as he stepped forward to readjust the ball. Both midfielders shared a look but, in the end, chose not to argue, probably guessing what their young teammate was going through.

Deciding to trust him Havertz Jogged a couple of paces down the line acting as an option as he drew one of the 4 defenders in the wall. Aránguiz was more direct as he sprinted into the fray of the 18-yard box to join in the chaos. Standing over the ball Rakim closed his eyes for a second, taking the moment to steady his breathing before taking 5 long steps back.

"Oh, looks like he decided to take it himself, not sure if I would have had the kahunas to wave off my seniors at his age," Derek Rae stated as he watched the scene unfold below as the referee made the last checks before he blew his whistle.

"Just goes to show that confidence and ability go hand in hand," Stewart responded before coming to a stop as Rakim closed in on the ball at a rapid pace. In fact, his pass was much faster than what was required for a cross causing everyone to instantly think he was going for goal. "Could he be thinking of taking it on?"

His question was left unanswered as the figure in the black 22 jersey struck the ball, a soft thud later with his body leaning back he sent the ball rocketing forward. The ball contains so much velocity that Suttner on the rightmost side of the ball felt his sideburns get grazed as the ball flew past him. The ball continued to rotate as it flew towards the goal looking as if it was heading towards the near post.

Steffen in between the sticks had been guarding the far post expecting a cross for the Leverkusen players who were storming his box from the edge. But seeing the ball's direction he instantly forgot them as he sidestepped across his line reaching the near post in a breath. However, at that moment he cursed his heart as the high ball that was flying towards his box in a fairly straight line seemingly gained life.

Its rotation seemingly increased or finally overpowered the ball's forward momentum as it turned left cutting a boomerang arc across the face of the goal. I descended right around the back post where a lone figure in a black jersey was closing in. The ball hit the turf in front of Tah who was ready to adjust to its bounce only for it to spin on the spot before losing its momentum.

Not wasting the chance, Tah struck the ball firmly, slotting the ball into the back of the net causing the Spiel-Arena to erupt in cheers. The away fans who had been holding their breath jubilantly jumped from their seats throwing their beers into the air as they celebrated the goal. Not to mention the fans, Tah who had made his professional debut in 2014 with Fortuna Düsseldorf didn't hold back as he fished out the ball before running to the side celebrating wildly.

Not forgetting to point at Rakim who still held a serious expression he directly put him in a headlock dragging him to celebrate. Smiling wildly at the nearby Lions fans he told Rakim "That cross was too perfect I almost tripped over it, hurry up and smile brooding doesn't suit you, Your football is Joyful like the magician." he nudged his side before pushing everyone aside doing a shoulder shuffle dance prompting the rest of Leverkusen players to join in.

Chapter 369 369 Goal?

[73rd Minute a few moments ago]

The roar of the fans still echoed in Rakim's ears, as he watched his cross reach his intended target exactly how he had envisioned it. It was almost like his anger-fueled mind state was helping him reach a new level of control over the ball. He had tried similar shots in practice but only had a 7/10 success rate on a good day but when he struck the ball, he instinctively knew it would arrive where he wanted it.

Tah didn't let him down calmly scoring, giving him a sense of release but he wanted more, a lot more goals. The greed had just bubbled up when he was dragged along to celebrate by Tah who didn't care about his thoughts. So, despite still being angry, he found himself dancing in synch with the rest of his teammates side stepping as they shuffled their shoulders.

The camera panned across the Leverkusen bench, showing players and staff on their feet, clapping and cheering as the team celebrated. The commentators couldn't contain their excitement. However, the happiest by far was the manager who could finally breathe a sigh of relief seeing his team's goal drought finally come to an end.

"Well, well! That was pure class from the youngster," Derek Rae exclaimed as the replays rolled across the screen. The commentators marvelled at the arc of the ball, highlighting the sheer audacity of his strike. "The audacity, the vision and technique to pull off a pass like that, let alone in such a pressure situation—it's nothing short of spectacular. And look at Tah—cool as you like to finish it off. But that celebration—absolutely infectious!"

Stewart Robson chuckled. "You can see the camaraderie in this Leverkusen squad. Rakim's got every right to be angry after the foul earlier, but that cross... my word. It's like he channelled all that frustration into perfection. If he keeps this up, we might see more magic from him tonight."

The replay flashed on the screen, showcasing the curve of the ball from multiple angles, each one more impressive than the last. The boomerang-like trajectory drew gasps from the crowd even in slow motion. Especially when it lost all its momentum coming to a perfect stop in front of Tah who slotted it in calmly.

The match soon restarted, but the energy had shifted with the score now 1:1. Düsseldorf looked rattled, their players exchanging hurried passes as they tried to regain their composure. Meanwhile, Leverkusen pressed forward with renewed vigor. Havertz, Aránguiz, and Amiri began dictating the midfield, doing their best to win the ball back whenever the team lost it.

However, it was Rakim who was at the center of the shift in energy as dribbling became audacious and unhinged. Following Tah's advice he had shifted his focus to trying moves he normally wouldn't letting his creativity shine through no longer holding back.

[74th Minute]

The ball zipped into Rakim's path, a crisp pass from Havertz, and time seemed to slow. His first touch was magnetic, the ball glued to his foot as he surged forward. Rakim surged down the right flank, his eyes wide open as he scanned the field ahead. Two defenders closed in, anticipating a pass or a simple cut inside. Instead, Rakim dropped his shoulder and executed a double touch, nudging the ball from his right foot to his left and back again in one fluid motion, leaving the first defender stumbling.

The second defender lunged to close him down, Rakim's instincts were already at max allowing him to easily react. He flicked the ball through the defender's legs with a cheeky nutmeg, darting past him before the crowd could even process what they had just witnessed. A collective gasp erupted across the stadium as Rakim broke free down the flank, his pace electrifying.

With the defenders behind him, Rakim drove into the final third. The Düsseldorf left-back, Gießelmann, rushed to meet him, but Rakim wasn't fazed. Slowing down just enough to bait his opponent, he sent him a wide smile before performing a dazzling reverse elastico, accelerating past Gießelmann's on the flank.

The crowd went wild, the stadium reverberating with a deafening roar as Rakim skipped past Gießelmann like he wasn't even there. He effortlessly glided down the right wing with his eyes locked on the goal, not minding the gasps of astonished fans on the side. It was as if he had entered a new dimension, where nothing mattered but the ball, and every defender was just another obstacle to dance around.

He reached the edge of the penalty box, where Düsseldorf's defenders scrambled to block his path, but Rakim had no plans to give up the ball. His mind was locked in, as he took small delicate touches as the distance closed with each movement calculated. He swerved past another challenge with a deft roll Croqueta flicking the ball up slightly as he breezed past Düsseldorf center-back, Ayhan, who was left reaching for air.

He wasn't done as he flicked the air-borne ball up-looping over the figure of Baker sidestepping a lunge. Now in the box with some space, he lightly touched the ball down as he moved forward facing the Düsseldorf goalkeeper. Steffen rushed off his line, arms outstretched in a desperate attempt to close the gap.

He was coming at him fast, his body stretched wide, trying to force Rakim into a hurried decision But Rakim was unfazed by the pressure. Not hesitating he swung his left foot letting loose a carpet shot that hugged the turf slipping through the outstretched legs of the oncoming keeper. The stadium erupted in a thunderous roar, the crowd's collective shout deafening as Rakim continued running to the corner flag.

"GOOOOAAAL! WHAT A PLAYER!" Derek Rae shouted; his voice barely able to contain the excitement. "This kid is simply unreal! Rakim leaves his mark on this game with a spectacular goal. What a goal! And after that run, I wouldn't be surprised if he is just getting started."

Stewart Robson also chimed in. "Whatever Suttner said to him after that foul must have triggered something 'cause they are paying for it now, and that was honestly a ruthless display of skill. The nutmeg, the elastico... and then the ice-cold finish." The scoreboard now read 2:1, Leverkusen in the lead brightening the faces of the away fans.

Rakim wasn't done after that run though as whatever state he was in was hungry for more goals thus after Düsseldorf kicked off the game again, he wasted no time joining his team in pressing forward. Sven was the one to win it for the team as he took control of the loose ball after Tah headed down an aerial ball forward. The younger half of the Bender twins was looking to calmly slow the game down only to change his mind after spotting Rakim taking back on the wing.

Not hesitating too long he sent a sharp diagonal ball to the right flank homing in onto the feet of the winger. Rakim, seeing the ball coming towards him, pushed off Suttner who had been sticking to him as he trash-talked. Surprised by the sudden push Suttner jumped forward to resume the chase only to see the ball roll through his legs just as he reached Rakim.

The winger who had used his left heel to send a pass to Havertz didn't hesitate as he rounded Suttner breaking into the opposing half. Havertz didn't disappoint him by sending a return pass, allowing him to blitz down the flank. Gießelmann wasn't given the option to stand him up and was forced to mirror his run as he had already picked up speed.

The ball was glued to Rakim's foot as he surged down the wing, not giving the defender the slightest chance of interfering. Luckily, he wasn't alone as the entire Düsseldorf defence converged on him when he reached the box's side. Nearby midfielder locked down any passing lanes whilst Suttner who had regained his wits was barreling down the flank ready to redeem himself.

With his back to the oncoming Suttner, Rakim suddenly stopped, causing Gießelmann to slide on the turf slightly. Not allowing him to gather himself, Rakim turned to face him as he scanned his surroundings. Seeing still rushing looking as if he was looking to take him out a cheeky smile appeared on his face.

Chapter 370 370 Pure Aura

[Saturday 24/08/2019, Merkur Spiel-arena, Location: Düsseldorf]

[Klaus Klein Pov]

"Why did you drag me here again, we should have gone to watch Little Women at the pictures football is so boring," Sophia said from my side pouting as she complained for the umpteenth time making me wonder why she insisted on tagging along in the first place.

We are both digital marketing graduates from the International School of Management (ISM) for short in Dortmund. We've never been particularly close but moved in the same friend circles and since we did the same subject we also studied together. She somehow ended up working in the same company I had done my apprenticeship with The European headquarters of the Ford Motor Company.

Since none of our friends worked at the company, I somehow became her best friend, which in hindsight is normal given how much time we spent working together. However, that is work stuff why for the lord of him she insist on bothering him on his weekends he would never understand. Can't a man go to the spa in peace, can't a man go shopping for dresses in peace, can't a man watch his favourite team in peace without being bothered?

Thinking about it 9/10 things he had been doing in his free time had been commandeered by her. She would always find an excuse to convince him to tag along to her thing, instead of what he had been planning on doing. 'Maybe I'm just too weak-willed,' no that's not right it's only when I'm dealing with her that I can't seem to win an argument.

"What's with that look?" she asked as I glanced over her above-average figure, well not that I would know but the men in the office end her a second glance when she walks by so she must be better than Average. Her long slender legs were hugged by the denim jeans with a pair of Adidas superstars, and my newly bought Rex away kit hugged her C cup chest exposing her flat belly as she wore it crop top style.

Her blond shoulder-length hair framed her delicate face reminiscent of a baby kitten complimenting those blue eyes. "Sigh just don't stretch out my kit I plan on getting it signed," I responded before turning to focus on the field watching our young phenom cook again.

[77 minutes]

Not minding her cold stare or the fact she stomped on my loafers I watched with excitement as Rakim nutmeg Suttner sent a no-look pass to Havertz. In a matter of moments, he was right in front of me coming to a stop as he faced Gießelmann looking like he would break into the box directly. Klaus had been a casual footballer since the age of six, only stopping when he turned 16 to focus on school, so he knew just how special the dribbling skills of the kid in front of him were.

His breath hitched as he once again saw Suttner rushing towards him looking like he would do something stupid. Gripping the chair in front of me I swore I would jump over the 2 rows in front of me if that American F**k*r dared to play dirty again. My thoughts didn't get to linger though as Rakim performed a stepover with his left foot flashing over the ball.

Gießelmann danced left and right as Suttner was just a meter away from Rakim, but it was as if he was waiting for him to get closer. In the next moment, his left foot that had just flashed over the ball knocked it along the line only for his right foot to flick it up slightly for a short hop. It looked like he had just lost control of the ball and both Suttner and Gießelmann wouldn't waste this opportunity as both lunged forward.

However, something unbelievable happened in the next moment, his right foot which had just nudged the ball up flashed again performing a deft sombrero. The ball seemed to lack any form of spin as it floated over the lunging figure of Suttner. Before he could react Rakim's figure sidestepped him directly exiting the field letting the two Düsseldorf players crash into each other.

Klaus could have sworn that the boy wonder stared down Suttner who had panicked and lost his balance. Not trying to figure that out, at that very moment he watched Rakim flick the descending ball up around knee height as he cut into the box. Now juggling the ball between both of his legs he caused chaos in the Düsseldorf defence which had been expecting their two teammates to halt him.

Klaus leaned forward in his seat, completely mesmerized by the unfolding spectacle. He could feel the electricity coursing through his body as Rakim continued to dance around Düsseldorf's defenders keeping the juggling ball under tight control. No defender was willing to risk taking him down in the box thus despite surrounding him a clever turn was all he needed to escape.

A couple of steps from the penalty spot Hoffmann came to stop him, taking his opportunity when Rakim let the ball drop from his knee to his feet. Not hesitating he timed his tackle lunging feet first for a slide tackle already anticipating the contact with the ball. However, it never came as in a gravity-defying display of body control and agility Rakim took off hooking the ball with both feet as he vaulted over the tackle.

Klaus could hardly believe his eyes. For a moment, it felt like time had slowed as Rakim hovered in the air, his body twisting mid-flight. The stadium around them seemed to hold its collective breath as the ball hovered just out of Hoffmann's reach. With a graceful arc, Rakim's feet made contact with the ball after lightly liking it in front of him.

Steffen glued to his line had hesitated whether to rush out from the onset of his attack but hesitated too long and was only able to take a couple of steps. Now seeing the airborne winger who seemed to remain hanging there for a few seconds swing his right foot. He immediately jumped to the left across the face of his goal where he expected the ball to fly based on Rakim's swing.

What actually happened was that his foot missed the ball only for his left to smack it on the follow-through. (Thud) With the sweet noise of the all-piercing the net what followed was pandemonium as Sophia jumped up in joy knocking over my cola into the air. I didn't mind though as I followed suit shouting my lungs out, putting an arm around her as we celebrated with travelling Leverkusen fans.

The roar of the crowd washed over me, drowning out everything else. I stood there, mouth agape, trying to process what had just happened. Rakim's goal was nothing short of spectacular and from where I sat, I had the perfect vantage point. "Unbelievable..." I managed to utter as he sprinted to our corner flag arms wide with a bright smile before performing his Griddy Celebration.

Still mesmerized by the scene I had just witnessed, I did not take my seat with the rest of the fans, only coming to reality when Sophia's lips locked onto mine. 'Wait, what is happening right now? Why is she kissing me? Maybe I'm still dreaming I knew that kind of dribbling was too good to be true.'