

## Football 391

Chapter 391 391 Vs Leipzig

[Saturday, 05/10/2019, 12:00, Leverkusen]

Saturday the BayArena was alive with anticipation as Bayer Leverkusen took on RB Leipzig in the 7th week of the Bundesliga. Both teams were in top form, with their respective coaches, Peter Bosz and Julian Nagelsmann, ready to face each other. This promises to be a thrilling encounter between two attacking sides in front of 26,000 spectators.

Leverkusen kicked off, with Aránguiz and Baumgartlinger controlling the tempo early on. Leipzig pressed high, forcing Sinkgraven and Tah into quick decisions at the back. Hrádecký, took a more active role in the match as he could be seen shouting orders, ensuring his defensive line maintained their shape against Leipzig's aggressive press.

In the 8th minute, Leipzig's Werner showed why he was one of Europe's most feared strikers. Exploiting a misstep by Sinkgraven, Werner raced down the right flank and fired a low cross into the box. Matheus Cunha lunged for it but narrowly missed, the ball rolling harmlessly across the face of the goal. Facing that jump scare was the push Leverkusen needed to elevate their level of play.

They responded with a counter in the 12th minute. Bellarabi surged down the left wing, beating Klostermann with a deft feint. Amiri's curling shot seemed destined for the top corner, but Leipzig's keeper, Gulácsi, pulled off a spectacular save, diving to his left to tip it over the bar.

The match intensified as Leipzig's midfield duo, Demme and Laimer, battled hard to break up Leverkusen's rhythm. Tackles flew in, with Baumgartlinger and Demme both earning stern warnings from the referee.

The intensity only grew as the match pressed on. By the 20th minute, both sides had found their rhythm, exchanging sharp passes and daring runs that had the crowd roaring with every near-miss. Leverkusen's three-man backline held firm despite Leipzig's relentless pressing, with Sven Bender particularly impressive in his timing and composure.

In the 23rd minute, Leipzig crafted a dangerous opportunity. Sabitzer threaded a perfectly weighted through ball to Werner, who ghosted between Bender and Tah. Werner unleashed a venomous strike from just inside the box, but Hrádecký was equal to the task, diving to his right to parry the ball away. The rebound fell to Forsberg, who tried to curl it into the far corner, but his effort skimmed just wide of the post.

Leverkusen, unrattled by the near concede, launched a counterattack in the 27th minute. Havertz picked up the ball deep in midfield, his vision and technical ability on full display as he drove forward, weaving past Demme and Laimer. Spotting the overlapping run of Weiser on the right, Havertz delivered a perfectly weighted pass.

Weiser latched onto the ball skipping past Halstenberg with a deft step over before whipping in a low cross into the six-yard box. Still, Pohjanpalo couldn't make the decisive connection, the ball rolling agonizingly across the face of the goal. The BayArena erupted in frustration but quickly regained its voice, urging the home side forward. It worked as they responded more urgently, pushing Leipzig deeper into their half.

Bellarabi continued to terrorize Klostermann on the left, his quick feet and explosive speed to create an opening. Not wasting the opportunity, he cut inward in the 34th minute, and unleashed a fierce drive, through traffic in the box. The ball skipped under D. Upamecano's feet, passing by a forest of feet as it sliced through the box heading for near the post.

Gulácsi was able to react by diving towards the near post, but the ball took a deflection sailing towards the middle of the goal. The Bay Arena immediately erupted in uproar as the home fans jumped up from

their seats celebrating as Bellarabi sprinted towards the corner flag. The rest of his teammates were not too far behind him as they swarmed him in celebration as they pulled the winger into a hug.

The celebrations were electric, with the BayArena pulsating with energy as the home fans roared their approval. The game had been closer than they would have wanted it to be, but they didn't mind as they finally managed to gain the lead. Peter Bosz in the caching box could be seen animatedly pumping his fist in Joy.

Leverkusen had taken the lead, but the match was far from over. Leipzig regrouped quickly, with Nagelsmann shouting instructions from the touchline, urging his players to respond. Leipzig resumed play with renewed urgency, pushing higher up the field in search of an equalizer. In the 38th minute, Sabitzer found space on the right flank, delivering a dangerous cross into the box. Werner rose to meet it, but his header lacked precision, sailing harmlessly over the bar. Hrádecký wasted no time, quickly restarting play to maintain Leverkusen's momentum.

As halftime approached, the intensity remained high. In the 42nd minute, Havertz dazzled the crowd with a piece of individual brilliance. Picking up the ball just inside Leipzig's half, he danced past Demme with a slick drag-back and nutmegged Laimer, igniting cheers from the stands. He surged forward, but Upamecano read the play well, executing a perfectly timed sliding tackle to deny Havertz a clear shot on goal.

Leipzig's last chance of the half came in stoppage time. Forsberg floated a free kick into the box, aiming for Orban, who had pushed forward. The Leipzig captain rose above Bender and connected with a powerful header, but Hrádecký reacted superbly, tipping the ball over the bar with his fingertips. The referee blew the whistle shortly after, sending both teams into the tunnel with the score at 1-0 in Leverkusen's favour.

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The second half kicked off with both teams making tactical adjustments. Nagelsmann brought on Nkunku for Demme to inject creativity into Leipzig's midfield, while Bosz kept faith in his starting XI, urging them to maintain their high tempo.

Leipzig started strong, pressing Leverkusen aggressively. In the 48th minute, Nkunku showcased his flair, threading a through ball to Werner, who found himself one-on-one with Hrádecký. The crowd held its breath as Werner struck the ball low and hard, the Leverkusen goalkeeper had no chance as the shot was just too well placed.

Werner's strike thundered into the bottom corner, silencing the BayArena as Leipzig equalized in emphatic fashion. The Leipzig players rushed to the corner flag, celebrating as their fans roared in approval. Nagelsmann clapped enthusiastically on the touchline, his substitution paying immediate dividends.

The game was now perfectly poised, with both teams locked at 1-1. Leverkusen restarted with renewed determination, pushing forward in waves to reclaim their lead. In the 52nd minute, Amiri and Havertz combined brilliantly on the edge of the box, their quick one-twos slicing through Leipzig's midfield. Amiri found space to shoot but his effort was blocked by Klostermann, who threw himself in front of the ball.

Leipzig responded with a dangerous counterattack in the 57th minute. Sabitzer, now operating more centrally, sprayed a diagonal ball to Nkunku, who drifted out wide to exploit space left by Bellarabi's advanced position. Nkunku whipped in a curling cross that Forsberg met with a diving header, but Hrádecký was once again equal to the task, palming the ball away with a spectacular save.

60th minute Bosz made his first change of the match in the form of Wendell replacing Sinkgraven to strengthen his defence. A couple of minutes later Diaby replaced Bellarabi on the left flank and

Demirbay came on for Aránguiz in the middle. With these series of changes, he had revamped his whole left flank urging his team to control the wing for both attack and defence.

The fresh legs injected new energy into Leverkusen's play, and the tactical adjustments quickly paid off. Diaby, in particular, made an immediate impact with his blistering pace, tormenting Klostermann who had just breathed a sigh of relief at seeing Bellarabi leave the game. In the 63rd minute, Diaby collected a long diagonal pass from Baumgartlinger, driving at Klostermann who dropped deeper than he should clearly wary of Diaby's pace.

Using this opportunity Diaby cut inwards with a swift change of direction and unleashed a curling shot that forced Gulácsi into a fingertip save. Leverkusen began to dominate possession, with Demirbay orchestrating play in midfield. His composure on the ball allowed Havertz and Amiri to push higher up the pitch, creating space and opportunities.

Seeing this Nagelsmann jumped into action making his last substitutes. Sabitzer on the right wing came off for the defensive-minded Patrik Schick to support Klostermann behind him. Matheus Cunha also came off for the Danish Poulsen as Nagelsmann wanted to give Werner more support upfront.

Leipzig's changes brought immediate solidity to their shape, with Schick helping to contain Diaby's threat on the left flank. Poulsen's physical presence and aerial ability also added another dimension to Leipzig's attack, forcing Leverkusen's defenders to stay on high alert. In the 68th minute, Leipzig nearly capitalized on their renewed structure. Werner, now playing off Poulsen, received a clever flick-on and broke free down the left channel. Driving into the box, he cut inside past Bender and unleashed a powerful shot.

Chapter 392 392 Booking

In the 68th minute, Leipzig nearly capitalized on their renewed structure. Werner, now playing off Poulsen, received a clever flick-on and broke free down the left channel. Driving into the box, he cut inside past Bender and unleashed a powerful shot. However, Hrádecký once again proved his worth, diving low to his right to smother the effort. The rebound fell to Forsberg, who swung his foot to meet the ball first time, but he wasn't the only one swinging for the ball.

Tah who had been marking him also swung his foot resulting in both men hitting the ball at the same time. The odd lack of resistance left both players off balance and in their attempt to strike the ball, but none managed to land a clear strike. Thus, Hrádecký was surprised to see the ball lazily floating towards him just as he sprung up from the ground ready to make another save.

Still, he went through the motion of catching the ball and throwing himself to the ground acting as if he had just saved a cannon of a shot. "Here," his teammates didn't let him act for long as heard Diaby exclaim from the left wing as he started running up the field. Without hesitation, Hrádecký jumped up from the ground and sprinted to the edge of his box in a matter of seconds.

His right arm was drawn back mirroring a javelin throw as he looked ahead seeing Diaby ready to explode past his marker. He changed his mind at the last second as he watched the Leipzig defence subconsciously shift that way. Trusting his instincts he sent his throw up the right wing instead where Havertz's had dropped back to receive it just a couple of paces from the halfway line.

Havertz wasn't expecting the ball to go to him but still managed to react expertly by chesting it down before his marker could react. Performing a quick Cruyff Turn he left Demme behind him before bolting down the wing, his long strides eating up the ground as Leipzig's defenders scrambled to track back. In a matter of moments, he crossed into the final third before Orbán managed to catch up to him and stand in his way.

Havertz didn't take him on though as he played a sharp pass inwards into the feet of Joel Pohjanpalo who held off Upamecano. The Leverkusen striker did his best to hold off his marker as he turned in the other direction unleashing a diagonal through ball past Klostermann. Diaby didn't disappoint as he accelerated forward latching onto the ball in just two long strides racing towards the corner flag.

Klostermann couldn't even catch up with him before he sent a sharp cross into the box just around the penalty spot. Havertz sprinted into the box, reading the play perfectly as Diaby's cross flew in with pace

and precision. The Leipzig defenders were caught off-guard by the speed of Leverkusen's transition, and Orbán scrambled to close down Havertz.

The ball sailed past the near post, bypassing both defenders and attackers until it found Kai Havertz at the far post. Havertz adjusted his body mid-air, twisting to connect with the cross on his weaker foot. His volley was struck clean and true, sending the ball rocketing toward the goal.

Gulácsi reacted instinctively, diving to his left, but the shot was too powerful and too precise. The ball bulged the back of the net, and the BayArena erupted in deafening cheers. Havertz sprinted toward the corner flag, arms outstretched, as his teammates rushed to celebrate with him. 2-1 Leverkusen!

The stadium echoed with chants of Havertz's name as the scoreboard lit up. Peter Bosz clapped enthusiastically on the sidelines, but the rest of the team's players were less reserved. They directly jumped up from their seats running in the direction of the corner flag where Havertz was heading to join in on the celebrations.

It was a spur-of-the-moment thing, but they were all exhilarated by taking the lead that no one minded it. Meanwhile, Nagelsmann furiously barked instructions to his team, urging them to regain their focus. Some disgruntled Leipzig players even tried to call out for an offside, but the match official was having none of it.

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Leipzig restarted the game with renewed urgency. In the 73rd minute, Poulsen received a long ball from Sabitzer and used his physicality to hold off Tah. He laid it off to Werner, who darted into the box with speed as he slipped by his marker, but he didn't get far as a tug on his shoulder sent him tumbling to the ground.

The Leverkusen players didn't even get a moment to process what had happened when the ref blew his whistles and pointed to the spot. Bender tried to plead his innocence, but the referee was having none of it as he pulled out a red card sending the defender off the field. In his view, Bender was the last man, and Werner was through on the goal, so his tug warranted a sending-off.

The BayArena erupted in a mix of frustration and disbelief as Sven Bender trudged off the pitch, shaking his head in frustration. The Leverkusen bench protested furiously, but their appeals fell on deaf ears. With their captain sent off, Leverkusen were down to ten men and now faced the daunting task of defending a penalty against Leipzig's clinical forward, Timo Werner.

Peter Bosz tried to protest on the sidelines, but the fourth official remained impassive to his arguments. In the end, he could only console Bender who walked by him as he focused on the penalty that was about to be taken.

Werner confidently placed the ball on the penalty spot, taking a moment to steady his breathing. Hrádecký stood on his line, bouncing lightly on his toes, trying to read the striker's intentions. The tension in the stadium was palpable, the fans holding their breath as Werner began his run-up.

He struck the ball firmly, aiming for the bottom left corner. Hrádecký guessed wrong diving to the right and could only watch as the ball sent his net bulging, eliciting a triumphant cheer from the away fans. 2-2 Leipzig!

The away fans roared in celebration as Werner jogged toward the corner flag, pointing to the Leipzig crest on his shirt with a determined expression. His teammates rushed to join him, a mix of relief and jubilation written on their faces. Meanwhile, the Leverkusen fans in the BayArena were stunned into silence, the lead they had fought so hard for was now gone.

Peter Bosz wasted no time reacting. Down to ten men and with the match tied, he signalled for Havertz to drop into midfield and Baumgartlinger to drop into the back line. Weiser also dropped into the back line creating a flat 4 at the back bolstered by a flat 3 of Diaby, Havertz, and Amiri. The change in formation into a 4-3-1 gave Leverkusen a higher defensive presence in the middle of the field.

None of that matters to the Leipzig squad who smelled blood in the water after not only equalizing but now being up by a man. They began to push relentlessly, their numerical advantage allowing them to dominate possession and pin Leverkusen deep in their half. Nagelsmann could be seen on the touchline, urging his players forward, his tactical adjustments amplifying the pressure on Leverkusen's makeshift backline.

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Sabitzer, now operating as Leipzig's creative hub, dictated the play from midfield. He sprayed a cross-field pass to Nkunku, who took it down expertly before driving at Wendell. Nkunku skipped past the left-back with a clever step-over and drilled a low cross into the six-yard box. Poulsen lunged for it but was beaten to the ball by a desperate clearance from Baumgartlinger, who had tracked it back into the box.

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Leverkusen, under siege, looked for opportunities to counter. Havertz, now deeper, showed his versatility by intercepting a pass meant for Laimer. With a quick turn, he released Diaby on the left wing. Diaby's blistering pace allowed him to sprint past Klostermann, but his cross into the box lacked precision, sailing over Pohjanpalo and into the arms of Gulácsi.

Leipzig responded immediately, launching another wave of attacks. Werner and Poulsen combined seamlessly, with Poulsen acting as a pivot to draw defenders and create space. In the 81st minute,

Werner played a delicate one-two with Sabitzer and found himself through on goal again, but Wendell managed a last-ditch sliding tackle to deny the German striker a clear shot.

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Leverkusen's resilience was beginning to show cracks. A misplaced pass from Amiri in midfield allowed Leipzig to pounce. Nkunku capitalized, threading a pass to Forsberg, who unleashed a curling effort from just outside the box.

Chapter 393 394 DFB Campus (2)

[Monday, 07/10/2019, 10:00, DFB Campus,]

Rakim followed Coach Manuel Baum through the sleek corridors of the DFB Campus. Every step echoed faintly against the polished floors, and the faint hum of activity filled the air. Screens on the walls displayed training schedules, fitness metrics, and inspirational clips of Germany's iconic World Cup moments. Rakim caught himself pausing briefly at a clip of Mario Götze's decisive goal in the 2014 World Cup final. The roar of the crowd still sent shivers down his spine.

He had gotten to watch the tournament in this life, and his dad had even taken them to watch the finals live in Maracanã. So, he was able to see this legendary moment live as 22-year-old Mario Götze became the king of the world. He could still remember the look of joy on his father's face when his home country lifted the cup. Despite having lived most of his adult life in America he still considered Germany his home and was happy to see them succeed.

"You'll get your orientation shortly," Baum said as they entered a modern lounge area, where a handful of young players were seated. They had completed their morning training and had some time off which they used to relax. Some were engaged in animated discussions, while others leaned back, earphones in, scrolling on their phones.

"You might know this lad but let me formally introduce you to Rakim Rex from Leverkusen's senior team and your new teammate for the Poland campaign," Baum announced, drawing their attention. "He's young but his talent is self-evident, honestly we're lucky the USA didn't want him."

The lounge went quiet as the players turned their attention to Rakim. He could feel their eyes scanning him, assessing whether the hype around him was real. For a moment, no one spoke, until a tall player with a confident grin and sharp cheekbones stepped forward.

"Youssoufa Moukoko," the boy introduced himself, extending his hand. "Welcome to the squad. Leverkusen, huh? Guess that means you know Florian already."

Rakim dabbed him up appreciating the warm welcome from him. "Yeah, Florian and I have trained together quite a few times, can't wait to play an official match together."

Following his words he spotted the blonde boy in question fully engaged in a game of mortal combat on the Play Station. "Huh yeah I know Rakim he's ok, just don't let him cut inside," He offhandedly commented after one of the nearby guys asked him a question. From how he was engrossed in trying to finish off Armel's character, he wouldn't be surprised if the guy hadn't noticed them coming in.

Rakim smirked at Florian's offhand comment, his competitive spirit already stirring. "Don't let me cut inside? You better hope I don't show you in training," he called out, loud enough to grab Florian's attention.

Florian glanced over, a sly grin forming on his face as he delivered a final blow to Armel's character on the screen. "We'll see about that. Just don't cry when I nutmeg you," he quipped, the playful jab drawing laughter from some of the players around them.

Coach Baum clapped his hands to regain focus. "Alright, that's enough for now. Rakim, I'll leave you to settle in and get to know the boys. You've got a lot of work ahead, so don't get too comfortable." He turned to the rest of the team. "Afternoon training starts at 14:00 sharp. Don't be late."

As Baum left, Youssoufa motioned for Rakim to follow him to an empty seat. "Come on, you've got to meet the rest of the crew. And don't worry about Florian; he's all talk unless it's Mortal Kombat."

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[Monday, 07/10/2019, 13:30, DFB Campus Training Grounds]

Rakim stood at the edge of the pristine training pitch, tying the laces on his Black and gold Ace 11's. They had been tweaked to his liking by the Apex's R&D, with the boot that was previously a size 10.5, now being closer to a 10.75 perfectly hugging his feet. The sock was even heightened slightly following his request giving him his ankle more security.

Around him, the other players were stretching and warming up, their chatter blending with the sound of crisp autumn leaves rustling in the breeze. The air was filled with the faint scent of fresh grass and the distant hum of passing cars. They weren't the only ones on the training ground as national teams of all ages could be seen training in the complex.

Assistant coach Marcus Sorg blew his whistle, signalling the start of the session. "Alright, boys, let's get moving! Start with light passing drills. Keep it sharp, keep it clean."

Rakim partnered with Wirtz, the two quickly falling into a rhythm. The ball zipped back and forth between them, their touches precise and accurate. Wirtz grinned after one particularly deft pass. "You excited to be here? Wasn't sure if you were serious when you said you might play for Germany,"

"Yeah, didn't think the dual citizenship application would go through so quickly, guess being a footballer has its perks," Rakim responded as he crisply sent the ball back to the Wirtz waiting feet.

As the session progressed, the drills intensified. Rakim's group rotated through tactical exercises, focusing on maintaining possession under pressure. Coach Baum observed from the sidelines, barking instructions when players faltered. Rakim's sharp movements and ability to read the game quickly drew attention.

Most of the drills were more focused on formation drills, passing games and transition exercises. Unlike in Leverkusen where they trained to get better the exercises were focused on improving their chemistry and enhancing their teamwork. Realizing this from the get-go, Rakim focused on taking as much information as possible and delivering exactly what they asked for.

Even when asked to play in different positions from his familiar wing he didn't complain and simply completed what was asked. "Rex shows great awareness, but his defensive ability is just passable," Coach Baum observed from the sidelines as Rakim was moved to playing in midfield.

"He is a pure attacking player, having the average defensive ability at Bundes Liiga level is already good enough," Assistant coach Marcus Sorg commented from the side, "Considering the results he produces on the attacking end even if he simply let the opponents by it would still be worth it keeping him on the field."

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[Monday, 07/10/2019, 16:00, DFB Campus Recovery Zone]

After the gruelling session, the players were ushered into the recovery zone—a sleek, temperature-controlled room lined with state-of-the-art equipment. Rakim found himself in an ice bath next to Antonis Aidonis, who winced as he submerged himself.

"So," Antonis said, his voice breaking the silence. "What's it like, being blackballed by the U.S. team?"

Not at all expecting the sudden question, Rakim almost slipped out of the ice bath he was sitting in. "You don't ease into things, do you?" he retorted with a wry smile as he took a sip of his water. "It's not so bad, feels like the minor league rejected me only for a team in the majors to sign me. Like I got to face my idol in the biggest club competition in the world."

"Fair enough, it's crazy how you not only got to play against Ronaldo but also beat him," Antonis commented from the side sounding much more impressed. "Is it true that you rejected his kit just because it was a Juventus kit?"

Chapter 394 393 DFB Campus

[Saturday, 05/10/2019, 13:27, Leverkusen]

The shot seemed destined for the top corner, and even Hrádecký stood rooted to the ground unable to react. However, the goddess of luck smiled on them as the ball struck the woodwork before flying out

for a goal kick. The BayArena crowd roared in approval, willing their team to hold on as Leipzig prepared to take the resulting corner. Forsberg delivered a dangerous inswinger, and Orbán rose highest, but his header flew narrowly over the crossbar, much to the relief of the home fans.

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Leverkusen's ten men were running on fumes, their defensive line stretched to the limit as Leipzig threw everything forward in search of a late winner. Peter Bosz shouted instructions from the touchline, urging his players to stay compact and disciplined. Despite their exhaustion, the Leverkusen players fought tooth and nail for every ball, their determination drawing thunderous applause from the home crowd.

In the 89th minute, Leipzig had another golden opportunity. Sabitzer, pulling the strings in midfield, lofted a diagonal ball over the top of the Leverkusen defence. Poulsen timed his run perfectly, chesting the ball down inside the box. Before he could unleash a shot, however, Tah recovered with a perfectly timed sliding tackle, sending the ball out for a corner. The BayArena erupted in cheers, the home fans appreciating the heroic defensive effort.

Forsberg stepped up to take the corner, delivering another teasing inswinger into the crowded box. Upamecano rose above everyone, meeting the ball with a powerful header. The crowd gasped as the ball rocketed toward the goal, but Hrádecký once again came to the rescue, leaping to his right to make a stunning one-handed save. He punched the air as his teammates rushed to pat him on the back. The Leverkusen keeper wasn't just keeping his team in the game—he was inspiring them.

[90+2]

With the game entering stoppage time, both teams were desperate. Leipzig continued their siege, their superior numbers allowing them to flood forward in waves. Werner found space on the left flank and

delivered a low cross into the box. Forsberg met it with a first-time shot, but his effort lacked power, and Hrádecký gathered it comfortably.

The keeper immediately launched a long throw down the left side, where Diaby was lurking. The winger, still bursting with energy despite the relentless pace of the match, sprinted past Klostermann and latched onto the ball. As Leipzig's defenders scrambled to recover, Diaby cut inside, drawing two defenders toward him.

Spotting the run of Amiri, who had surged forward from midfield, Diaby slipped a clever through ball into the box. Amiri controlled it with his first touch and fired a low shot toward the far corner. Gulácsi dived desperately and got the faintest of touches, deflecting the ball just wide of the post.

[90+4]

The resulting corner was Leverkusen's last chance to snatch victory. Havertz stepped up to take it, his delivery finding Tah at the far post. The towering centre-back rose above Poulsen and connected with a powerful header, but the ball flew inches over the crossbar. The crowd groaned in unison, their hopes dashed.

The referee blew the final whistle moments later, bringing an end to an electrifying encounter. Full-time: Leverkusen 2–2 Leipzig.

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"It's not what we expected coming into this match but it's what we were given, naturally I would prefer that we managed to gather all 3 points. However, when you play a strong team like we did today

walking away with a single point after going a man down is more than you could ask for." Peter Bosz said as he answered one of the reporter's questions already prepared to be scrutinized for failing to take away all 3 points.

A journalist from Kicker leaned forward, his notepad ready. "Coach, Kai Havertz had another standout performance today. Scoring a goal and a tremendous work rate after being moved deeper into midfield. Can we expect more of this from him as the season progresses?"

Bosz smiled, nodding slightly. "Kai is a special talent. He can adapt to any role we ask of him, whether it's attacking or supporting defensively. He stepped up when we needed him to most, and that's the mark of a player destined for greatness."

The focus shifted as a reporter from Bild raised their hand. "There were controversial moments in the match, particularly the red card for Bender. Do you believe it was the correct decision?"

"I have great respect for the referees and the difficult decisions they have to make. However, from my perspective, the red card seemed harsh. Sven was trying to recover and challenge for the ball, and the contact was minimal. But decisions are part of football, and we have to accept them." Bosz calmly responded not at all shocked by the pointed question.

Another question came from a reporter from Sky Sports Germany. "Moussa Diaby was electric today, particularly in the final minutes. What are your thoughts on his impact, and could he become a starter in future matches?"

Bosz's eyes lit up at the mention of Diaby. "Moussa is the type of player who can change a game at the drop of a hat. His pace and creativity bring something unique to the team. When he is healthy, he is one of the best wingers in today's game and that's why we plan on giving him all the time he needs after

recovering from his recent injury. We believe in his potential which he has displayed in recent matches and there is only more to come."

"Today, he showed why we believe in him, and he's making a strong case for more minutes. But we also have a deep squad, and competition is healthy. Everyone will have their moment." he quickly added before moving on to the next question. The post-match press conference continued, with questions about the team's tactics, the substitutions, and the players' morale. Each answer from Bosz displayed his confidence in his squad despite only walking away with a draw today.

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[Monday, 07/10/2019, 10:00, DFB Campus,]

With the second international break starting on the 7th of October, some of the players chose to go on holiday with their families but for Rakim, this was not the case. No, he had landed in Frankfurt in the morning and was picked up by a DFB designated driver who proceeded to drive him to the Campus.

Upon arrival what greeted him was another futuristic training facility with all the newest gadgets to create the next 2014 dream team. Having grown up in the ace academy he was already used to these types of facilities, but he still appreciated the German Football Association headquarters.

As Rakim stepped out of the car, he adjusted the strap of his duffle bag over his shoulder and took in the impressive surroundings. The DFB Campus was pristine, with its sleek glass architecture and manicured training fields stretching as far as the eye could see. The iconic eagle emblem of the German Football Association adorned the entrance, serving as a reminder of the history, prestige, and pride of the national team known as Die Mannschaft.

As he appreciated the sight, a man in his forties with a prominent forehead and receding hairline approached him. "Welcome, Rakim. We're glad to have you here. I hope we can achieve great results together." The man Rakim now recognized as Manual Baum Germany's under 20 head coach stated with a friendly smile as he stretched out his hand.

Rakim didn't leave him hanging as he met his gaze and shook his hand firmly. "Let's make history together coach."

Chapter 395 395 Competition Don't Sleep

[Tuesday, 08/10/2019, 05:30, DFB Campus Gym]

The next morning, Rakim was the first to arrive at the gym, beating the sun to the horizon. Going through his morning routine he continued talking to Eva, in his head as he pulled up his status screen since she required no sleep, she chimed in his head as he adjusted the weights on the leg press machine.

[FOOTBALL SINGULARITY SYSTEM]

USER: Rakim Rex

AGE: 15yrs

TALENT ASSESSMENT: Grade - S

Singularity Points:  $5400 + 700 = 6100$

Position: Winger

(Evaluation: A wunderkind in the truest sense, who has proven his ability to the world throw a boulder into a still pond)

[ USER STATS: Under 23 Grade]

>Physical Fitness: A

Balance and Coordination: S

Speed: A-

Agility: A++

Strength: B-

Stamina: B-

>Football Technique: S

>Game Intelligence: A

>Mental Ability: S+

>Singularity Traits:

- Mamba Mentality (Garde Unique), - MR ShowTime: (Grade -A)

>Skills

\*Silver Grade: Eagle King's Goal Sense (Passive)

\*Silver Level Comeback Kid (Passive)

\*Bronze Ankle Brace's (Passive)

\*Bronze Heavy artillery (Active)

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{You should expect to receive a tournament-specific mission closer to the start of the competition.} She chimed in with a neutral tone as Rakim complained about only getting long-term missions that made him forget the system even existed on a regular day. After all, other than training to get better, his free time was spent with May and his family. If not for the fact he talked with Eva every day and the occasional match review he might even believe he was crazy.

Moving on to do some medicine ball drills Rakim continued working up a sweat as he responded to Eva. "That's good, not that I'm getting bored, but it's been a while since I made a tangible breakthrough,"

A full hour and a half elapsed before he knew it as he went through different drills in the expansive gym. All the fancy gadgets that were in his mother's gym could be found here, allowing him to work up a sweat. At 7 am sharp Rakim finally came to a stop just as he finished going through a 3-minute rope drill that left his arms aching.

Taking a 10-minute break, he got up from the ground whipping his sweat with the towel in his hands before proceeding to strap on sensors and hopped on the treadmill ready to go for a 10-mile jog. He started off with a measured pace but proceeded to progressively increase his pace whenever he got too comfortable. 35 minutes later, Rakim had completed his 10K and was drenched in sweat from head to toe, but his breathing was ragged.

He stepped off the treadmill, a towel draped around his neck, as beads of sweat traced lines down his face. The gym was starting to fill with the team's early risers as he made his way to words the yoga/stretching area. Youssoufa Moukoko strolled in, headphones slung around his neck, while Kevin Ehlers headed straight for the squat rack.

"Early bird, huh?" Youssoufa remarked, nodding toward Rakim.

"Rise early for greatness," Rakim replied, taking a swig from his water bottle. "Competition doesn't sleep."

Youssoufa chuckled. "True, but it's way too early for me to be running 10K."

"Don't have to run a 10K but getting up is half the battle, just start light and you will be doubling your training time in a couple of weeks," Rakim told his teammate as he emptied his bottle ready to participate in the team's morning yoga session.

Before Youssoufa could respond to his comment, Assistant Coach Marcus Sorg entered the gym, clipboard in hand. "Morning, gentlemen. Let's start this morning right, complete your morning stretches with coach Joachim, and make sure to let us know if you feel any niggles. We will have a light break sharply at 08:00 and go cycling at 08:45."

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[Tuesday, 08/10/2019, 08:45, DFB Campus Cycling Track]

The crisp morning air filled Rakim's lungs as he adjusted the straps on his cycling helmet. The team gathered at one of the exits of the main facilities all standing next to their bikes ready to go at any

moment. They would be riding into the city and along the river main for a while before looping back at some point.

The cycling leader would be Assistant Coach Sorg who will be setting the pace for the boys to follow. He divided the group into smaller pods based on fitness levels and cycling experience. Rakim found himself paired with Florian Wirtz, Youssoufa Moukoko, and Angelo Stiller. Each player had a state-of-the-art bike with built-in sensors that monitored speed, cadence, and heart rate.

"Alright, boys," Coach Sorg called out, as he strapped his own helmet on. He was also wearing the same primarily white and black national team tracksuit. "This isn't a race—it's about building endurance and maintaining a steady pace. Stick with your group and push each other. Remember, recovery is as important as intensity."

Rakim settled into the saddle, testing the pedals. He glanced at Florian, who smirked back. "Bet you can't keep up," Florian teased, his competitive edge peeking through.

Rakim raised an eyebrow. "He just said it's not race," Florian did not mind his deadpan gaze as he confidently chuckled, "Oh my American friend everything is race in life it's just the rules and objectives that change." And with those words, he kicked up and started driving behind the second group.

Rakim smirked at Florian's words, leaning into the pedals as his group pushed forward. The team wove through the carefully planned streets of Frankfurt, flanked by the iconic river Main. Early-morning joggers and fellow cyclists lined the paths, some turning their heads as the German Under-20 squad cycled past.

"Florian talks a big game," Angelo Stiller said, his voice carrying over the rhythmic hum of tyres on pavement. "But you'll see—he fades after about fifteen minutes of effort."

"Don't let him fool you," Youssoufa Moukoko added with a grin, pedalling effortlessly. "The guy's got sleeper stamina for days."

Rakim laughed, already enjoying the banter. "Guess I'll find out soon enough."

The ride stretched out as the group climbed gentle inclines and coasted down long stretches. Rakim felt the burn in his legs intensify as the pace subtly increased. Despite the challenge, he appreciated the steady rhythm of the exercise. It gave him time to reflect on his journey to the national team, his desire for national glory, and what lay ahead in Poland.

As they approached a scenic bridge crossing the river, Florian turned his head back. "Beautiful view, huh?" he said, not slowing down.

Rakim, keeping pace, glanced out at the shimmering water below. "It's aight, we got water in Florida too," he replied nonchalantly, knowing Florian was fishing for a reaction.

Florian laughed, shaking his head. "Florida water, huh? Does it come with gators or is that just in the swamps?"

Rakim grinned. "Gators, hurricanes, crazy drivers—you name it. Adds to the atmosphere,"

"Sounds more like every ride's a survival test," Youssoufa quipped, chuckling as he eased into a relaxed cadence.

The group fell into a steady rhythm as they crossed the bridge, the morning sun warming their backs. Rakim found himself surprisingly at ease with the group. Despite being the newcomer, the camaraderie made him feel like he belonged. It wasn't about individual accolades here; it was about building trust as a team.

As they entered a quieter stretch of the path, Coach Sorg whistled sharply, signalling a regroup. The smaller pods converged into a single formation, each rider finding their position. The pace slowed slightly, allowing for some chatter.

"So, Rex," Angelo began, glancing over at him. "What's it like playing in the Champions League? Bet it's different from riding with us here."

Rakim shrugged, adjusting his grip on the handlebars. "It's a surreal feeling for sure especially when you get to line up against players you only saw on FIFA. Plus, you gotta act all cool like it's not a big deal when in reality you are ready to celebrate even the slightest win you get on a player like Ronaldo,"

"Dang you really living the American dream," one of the guys commented prompting the rest to chuckle as they continued pedalling.

As they looped back toward the DFB Campus, the team fell into silence, the only sounds being the rhythmic clicks of gears shifting and the hum of tyres on pavement. The final incline back toward the training facility tested everyone's endurance as they were told to sprint in the last stretch of 500 meter incline.

Florian glanced over, smirking. "Let's see if Florida water gives you wings," he teased, surging forward with a burst of energy. Rakim shook his head, laughing, but couldn't resist the challenge. He stood up on his pedals, muscles burning as he pushed himself to match Florian's pace.

[Wednesday, 23/10/2019, 15:45, Bydgoszcz Airport, Poland]

The team disembarked from the sleek Lufthansa charter flight, stepping onto Polish soil with a collective sense of anticipation and determination. The crisp autumn air carried the scent of rain and the faint hum of distant traffic as Rakim Rex adjusted his tracksuit and surveyed the scene. Flags from various nations fluttered above the airport terminal, maybe a reminder of the global competition awaiting them or simply a warm welcome.

It had been a gruelling two weeks leading up to this moment. Rakim thought back to the training sessions at the DFB Campus, where every drill, every tactical meeting, and every recovery session was carefully planned out even to the portions of their meals just to get them ready for the Under-20 World Cup.

The players had endured a regimen that tested their limits, both physically and mentally. Mornings began with intensive strength and conditioning sessions, designed to build stamina for the tournament's relentless schedule. Rakim, fully embracing the mamba mentality, pushed himself as far as he could, forcing the world-class coaches present to step up their game to give him adequate training.

Being called by the Leverkusen management asking them why one of their wunderkind was calling their coaching staff for training drills was not a good look. His work ethic rubbed off on some of his teammates such as Wirtz who was already used to it as he saw glimpses of it at their team but now got to experience it in person since they were roommates. Thus, he found himself waking up earlier to do more personal training just to not fall behind someone he considered a rival.

On the pitch, the focus was on tactical cohesion. Coach Baum drilled the team in high-press systems, transitions, and set-piece execution. Rakim, primarily positioned as a left winger, had honed his ability to exploit tight spaces and deliver precise crosses within that tactical scheme. It was weird for him having to adjust his pace to the much slower offensive teammates than what he was used to at Leverkusen.

However, they had their own strength, and he found ways to utilize them to not only score his own goals but also make them shine. He also had to get used to the coaches wanting to utilize him in that CAM role due to his attacking creativity and technical accuracy. He'd also been tasked with developing better defensive awareness, something he was admittedly less enthusiastic about not because he couldn't do it but was simply too lazy to put his full effort into it.

Small-sided games were a staple of their sessions, pitting the likes of Youssoufa Moukoko, Florian Wirtz, and Rakim against the team's formidable defenders, including Armel Bella-Kotchap and Kevin Ehlers. These matches were fiercely competitive, with tempers occasionally flaring, but the intensity only strengthened the group's bond.

Off the pitch, the players had spent countless hours in the tactical analysis room, dissecting the strengths and weaknesses of potential opponents. Rakim had been particularly attentive, noting patterns in how teams like Argentina and Italy defended wide players. However, the team he was most wary of was the star-studded England side which included 2 wonderkids the same age as he and Wirtz, and while they hadn't made a big splash in club football, they were poised to do so sometime this season or the next.

The first is a dual nationalist of Germany and England who chose to represent the country he grew up in. Jamal Musiala is probably the only player currently coming up in the game closest to Messi in terms of playing style. This is high praise on its own as quite a few players have tried to carry that mantle only to come up short, but not Jamal who has grown into his own.

The other of course was his evil twin the spectacular Jude Bellingham who joined German giants Borussia Dortmund at the age of 16 this summer. His talent speaks for itself as he is also putting up decent stats in the Bundesliga. The two of them were only a few of the future stars playing for the under-20 which made the 3 Lions the heavy favourite in the tournament in Poland.

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[Wednesday, 23/10/2019, 15:45, Bydgoszcz Airport, Poland]

"Let's get a move on boys," Coach Baum called out, snapping Rakim back to the present. The team gathered their luggage, dressed in matching black-and-white tracksuits emblazoned with the German eagle.

Rakim fell into step with Florian Wirtz and Youssoufa Moukoko as they made their way toward the team bus. "Feels real now, doesn't it?" Florian said, his voice tinged with excitement.

"Yeah," Rakim replied, his gaze fixed ahead. "You played in the national team all your life, right?"

"Not all my life but as soon as I turned 15, I made my debut with the Under 15's. It was only for one match before they moved me up the ranks." Florian calmly bragged, earning a few envious glances from some of the players. His rise in the national team ranks is nothing but phenomenal and his superb performance with the Leverkusen B team this season gave him the credit needed to get that call-up.

Moukoko seeing this, slung an arm around Rakim's shoulder leaving the bragging Wirtz behind. "Ignore him, you ready to make some headlines Florida?"

Rakim simply smiled at his question, "You must not know, everything I do makes headlines. Apparently, when you're handsome and half decent at football the media loves you,"

Hearing his friend's response Moukoko immediately shoved him aside before storming forward and muttering something about kids making him feel like he was not on top of his game. The two Leverkusen boys simply chuckled at his expression before they followed their teammates to the team bus. The bus ride to the team hotel was quiet, the players lost in their thoughts as the Zdzisława Krzyszkowiaka skyline rolled past the windows.

The hotel, nestled in a quieter part of the city, had been meticulously chosen for its facilities and proximity to the stadium. As they stepped off the bus, the team was greeted by a small contingent of German fans, waving flags and chanting words of encouragement. Despite youth tournaments being less popular than even the Olympic football competitions staunch supporters still followed them to spectate.

That goes especially since the FIFA organizers have been heavily advertised as a mini world cup of the future of football. Inside, the players were assigned their rooms, each having to room with another person and a copy of the team's itinerary for the next three days. Training sessions would continue, albeit lighter, focusing on fine-tuning and recovery. There would also be media obligations and opportunities to explore the city in their downtime.

Rakim dropped his bags onto his bed, gazing out the window at the sprawling city below. In three days, the competition would begin, and with it, the chance to prove himself on the global stage. For now, though, he wanted to take a quick shower and sleep off the jet lag as soon as possible.

"Guess we're roommates again," Wirtz exclaimed as he burst into the room with his own luggage, his bright smile remaining prevalent. "Sigh just don't eat sugar at dinner," Rakim replied with a tired sigh suddenly feeling all the fatigue hit him with a gut punch.

Chapter 397 397 Date

[Friday, 26/10/2019, 12:30, Bydgoszcz, Poland]

The small café on the corner of a cobblestone street in Bydgoszcz was quiet, its outdoor seating shaded by a canopy of golden autumn leaves. Rakim leaned back in his chair, his dreadlocks with gold highlights catching the sunlight as he sipped a steaming coffee. Across from him sat May Parker, her peach-blond hair cascading over her shoulders, the green of her eyes sparkling as she smiled at him over the rim of her hot chocolate.

"You, Okay?" May asked, tilting her head as she studied him. "I was expecting to find you in tears ready for me to nurse you back given what the media back home is saying about you."

Rakim smirked, setting his cup down. "Sorry to disappoint but I'm as cool as a cucumber, though I would be lying if I said that I'm not hoping we run into them during the tournament."

May chuckled, taking a small sip of her hot chocolate. "I'm sure you'd love nothing more than to embarrass them on the pitch. Though If you want to get petty let your girl know, I know a little about getting payback."

Rakim leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table, a playful glint in his eyes as he looked into her eyes. May didn't avert her eyes matching his gaze seemingly waiting for his response so she could ride to battle. "I see, you got any suggestions."

"Yes, you should just talk subliminal trash in the media or do a drake and send shots via Twitter and Instagram," She replied with a clear spark in her eyes as she continued to list various ways, he could embarrass the USA Football Association. "Better yet start posting about how superb the German football association is. You got pictures of your time at the DFB Campus just slowly release some of those with some motivational comments it will stoke the flames and... mph."

May was busy lining out her plan only to stop suddenly as her lips were sealed by Rakim's who quite literally took her breath away. Before she knew it her hot chocolate was tilting dangerously in her hand.

She quickly steadied it, with the last bit of mental clarity she had as Rakim continued to draw her deeper into the kiss.

May pulled back slightly, her cheeks flushed as she let out a breathy laugh. "Okay, you win. No more plotting revenge," she said, setting her hot chocolate firmly on the table. "For now."

"No, you can plot all you want. You're nose crinkles cutely whenever you enter revenge mode," Rakim replied with a playful smile as May narrowed her eyes, though the smile tugging at her lips betrayed her attempt to look stern. "Careful, Rex. Keep talking like that and I might start plotting on you."

Rakim laughed, leaning back in his chair, hands behind his head. "Oh yeah? I don't think I would mind that?"

"Please you wish." May rolled her eyes. "Anyway, it feels like forever since I last saw you,"

"I know I missed you too but we've both been busy, plus aren't you supposed to be in school?" He asked now looking genuinely curious as he knew she had been accepted into Georgetown University and accepted despite gaining a spot into Cambridge after being waitlisted. Her personal essay impressed the admissions officers at all the universities and despite not having the best grades she was accepted.

"Oh, about that Georgetown agreed to let me do a year abroad in an accelerated course in social media marketing and marketing communications." She replied with a proud expression that practically told Rakim to praise her, and he did by stretching out his hand to pet her head. "Stop that I'm not a kid anymore, anyway You are now looking at a proud student at the University of Cologne's business and marketing department."

Rakim raised an eyebrow, his shock clearly spreading across his face. "University of Cologne, huh? Don't tell me you moved just for me, you were so excited to go to your mother's alma mater."

May shrugged, her expression softening as she leaned forward, resting her chin on her hand. "It wasn't just for you, Rakim. Well, not entirely." She paused, a playful smirk forming. "Okay, maybe a little. But the program here is incredible, and it gives me a chance to experience Europe while supporting you. Win-win, don't you think?"

Rakim stared at her, looking at her happy expression that looked forced in his eyes. "Is your Dad so bad? I figured he'd be happy that you're going to college like he wanted an Ivy Plus school to boot"

May's smile faltered slightly at Rakim's question. She stirred her hot chocolate as her smile quickly faltered, her gaze dropping to the table for a moment before meeting his eyes again. "He was happy for the first 10 minutes," she said quietly. "But you know how he is always chasing the next best thing, climbing the next mountain or trying to outdo his competitor."

There was a moment of silence as Rakim considered what to say to her since May's relationship with her dad was complicated, to say the least. Even though she was his girlfriend, saying what he really thought about her dad is the equivalent of pressing the nuclear button on their relationship. He didn't have to make a decision just as he was about to force himself to say something no matter how perfunctory she spoke up.

"One of his buddy kids got into Yale and suddenly Georgetown was no longer good enough for him. He tried to make me go to Cambridge, disregarding my decision and even threatening not to pay the tuition." Rakim frowned, upon hearing her words.

"You know I don't like your dad, I never did," Rakim stated somberly as he reached out to grasp her hands. "He is an ok guy if I was looking for a friend or a buddy, he'd be ok but as a Dad, I'm not so sure."

From what I can remember my Dad has been to more of your games, birthdays and showcases than even I have. Yes, Emma was part of your cheer squad, but even when she later left, he would still travel with us as a family, and he might not look it at home but he's quite a busy guy."

May's fingers curled around Rakim's hand, her green eyes softening as she held his gaze. "You're right. Your dad has always been there for me... more than my own." Her voice was steady, but Rakim could sense the emotion she was trying to mask.

"That's not the point babe, no matter what you do it will never be enough. Your Dad is a junky for attention and power. With an even bigger ego than me, and he can't help himself from putting himself first and until he changes, he will always disappoint you. I know it's hard but I'm proud of you for staying true to yourself"

May smiled softly at Rakim's words, her eyes shimmering with unshed tears. "Thank you," she whispered. "It means a lot to hear you say that."

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[Friday, 26/10/2019, 13:15, Bydgoszcz, Poland]

Following their conversation that had taken a serious turn the both of them decided to brush it to the side and enjoy their date. Finishing their coffee, they decided to explore the city of Bydgoszcz since neither of them had ever been to Poland.

Chapter 398 398 It Begins

[Friday, 25/10/2019, 13:15, Bydgoszcz, Poland]

Following their conversation that had taken a serious turn the both of them decided to brush it to the side and enjoy their date. Finishing their coffee, they decided to explore the city of Bydgoszcz since neither of them had ever been to Poland.

Rakim and May strolled down the cobblestone streets of Bydgoszcz, hand in hand, their earlier conversation fading into the background as they immersed themselves in the charm of the city. The sun peeked through the clouds, casting a golden glow over the historic buildings, and the soft hum of street musicians filled the air.

"This place is beautiful," May said, her voice tinged with awe as she took in the vibrant colours of the Old Market Square. "It's like stepping into a postcard."

Rakim smiled, squeezing her hand gently. "It's nice. No Florida but what really is? I don't miss the gators for sure tho,"

"Oh, you sush. Burt Reynolds is cute he only bites when he is hungry," May joked with a short chuckle as she playfully slapped his shoulder.

"Yeah, and when is a Gator not hungry," he retorted clearly displeased at the memory of Burt Reynolds not understanding why someone would keep reptiles as pets.

They stopped at a small street vendor selling obwarzanki—traditional Polish pretzels. Rakim reached into his pocket, pulling out a few zloty coins to buy two. He handed one to May, who took a bite and let out a contented sigh.

"This is so good," she said, breaking off another piece. "You've got to try it."

Rakim nodded and proceeded to take a bite of the pretzel she was holding in her hands, surprising her. "You're right it tastes good," He simply replied with a bright smile on his face not minding her questioning glare.

"Eat your own, this one is mine," She hissed turning half her body away as she puffed out her cheeks prompting Rakim to poke her left cheek for fun. Before she could get angry, she found the pretzel in her hand had disappeared and replaced it with a new one. "Yours tastes better,"

"You haven't even tried yours so how could you know,"

"I just do," Rakim chuckled, shaking his head as he took a bite of his stolen pretzel. "Don't be so dramatic, just check out that stall next I think they're selling jewellery."

Following his words, he immediately dragged her to the stall selling homemade jewellery, not waiting for her response. As they approached the stall, May's eyes lit up at the array of handmade jewellery displayed on a velvet cloth. Intricately designed necklaces, bracelets, and rings gleamed in the soft afternoon sun.

Rakim released her hand, letting her explore as he leaned casually against the side of the booth. If he learned one thing from his father about placating women is that compliments and gifts go a long way and if you mess up, you either deny until proven guilty or throw yourself at their sword. However, if it's just something light you can always try and convert the anger into something positive which is why he craned his vast vision to spot the stalls selling homemade jewellery.

"See anything you like?" Rakim asked, watching her as she picked up a delicate silver bracelet adorned with small, colourful beads.

May held it up, tilting her head to examine it in the light. "It's so pretty," she said, glancing at him with a smile. "But I don't need it."

Rakim raised an eyebrow. "Need and want are two different things, May. Let me get it for you."

She started to protest, but Rakim was already speaking to the vendor in a mix of English and the few Polish phrases he'd learned the moment he found out the venue of the mini World Cup. Within moments, the bracelet was paid for and handed over in a small, drawstring pouch.

"Here," Rakim said, taking the bracelet out of the pouch and gently fastening it around her wrist. "Now you'll have something to remember this trip by—other than me, of course."

May rolled her eyes, though her cheeks flushed slightly. "You're impossible, you know that?"

"I've been told," Rakim replied with a grin. "But you keep me around anyway."

She laughed softly, admiring the bracelet on her wrist before taking his hand again.

"Alright, Mr. Impossible. Where to next?"

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[Friday, 25/10/2019, 13:15, Bydgoszcz, Poland]

The two continued their stroll, wandering into the heart of Bydgoszcz's Old Town. The colourful facades of the buildings and the calm flow of the Brda River gave the city an almost magical charm. They stopped at the famous Mill Island, where small bridges connected lush green spaces surrounded by water.

"Do you think you'll have time to explore after the games start?" May asked, her voice curious as they paused to watch a group of swans gliding across the river.

"Doubt it," Rakim admitted. "Once the tournament starts, it's all about focus. Training, matches, recovery, repeat. But maybe when we win, I'll get a free afternoon to celebrate."

"Sometimes I wonder where you get all that confidence from despite probably being the most introverted person I know." She said in a questioning tone. "Though I fully believe you will win, no matter what game you play in, the moment you have a ball at your feet you come to life and the world seems to revolve around you."

Rakim turned to May, her words settling warmly in his chest. He gave her hand a gentle squeeze, his gold-highlighted dreadlocks swaying slightly in the breeze. "That's because, on the pitch, everything makes sense. It's like... I don't have to think. I just know what to do."

May smiled, her green eyes shimmering in the soft light. "It's your gift, Rakim. And watching you play, it's like magic. I don't think anyone else in the world can do what you do, the way you do."

"Flattery will get you everywhere," he teased, grinning. "But seriously, having you here means a lot, especially since you are skipping lectures to be here."

"Oh, don't worry they are recorded so I can catch up I'm good really and before you ask, I'm staying at the Hilton hotel it's safe and comfortable," May told him already guessing what he was worried about. "Plus, Lisa will be joining me tomorrow to watch the matches, you guys are playing Japan, right?"

Rakim nodded, a small smile tugging at his lips. "Yeah, Japan first. Should be a good game, from the scouting report they're a fast attacking side, quite technical, and disciplined too."

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[Saturday, 26/10/2019, 19:00, Zdzisław-Krzyszowski-Stadion, Poland]

With only half an hour to go before the match, the stadium started to fill up with spectators from both sides took their seats. With Japan considered the home side all of their fervent fans wore their home white jerseys setting off a tide of white. The German side had a few sporadic patches of green around the stadium as most of their fans didn't bother to buy the away kit.

The two sides showed their love for their country by drawing their national flags on their cheeks. Most German fans made sure to bring their flags waving them excitedly whilst blowing into their plastic trumpets that had been popularized in the 2014 World Cup. It wouldn't be abnormal during national tournaments to hear them blowing in German neighbourhoods whenever the senior team scores a goal.

The Japanese fans weren't left behind in showing their love for the team as 4 large burly men sat in the first row with a large drum in front of them. Each time they struck the drum it felt as if Raijin was impacting the stands as the fans behind them sang songs that resembled war cries. With the stadium being filled up to 3/4's of its 20,187 capacity the atmosphere was quite high for a youth tournament considering that even some club team's stadiums can't get that many fans to show up to their matches.

Chapter 399 399 Japan

[Saturday, 26/10/2019, 19:00, Zdzisław-Krzyszowski-Stadion, Poland]

Japan Xi: 4-2-3-1

GK: Kosei Tani

RB: Riku Handa

CB: Takehiro Tomiyasu

CB: Yuki Kobayashi

LB: Daiki Sugioka

DM: Ao Tanaka

DM: Takuya Yasui

RM: Ritsu Doan

CAM: Takefusa Kubo

LM: Hiroki Abe

ST: Ayase Ueda

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"You've all seen then their starting lineup and whilst some of you might already play in the Bundesliga don't get too cocky. That only means they are hungrier to perform and to achieve glory and attract the attention of top clubs." Coach Baum said to the group of young faces who had been narrowed down to the final 23 who were selected to represent their country.

Looking at the young adults and even younger players who have already made a name for themselves in the Bundesliga, Blaum didn't believe that any country could overpower his squad. "I know you all must have glanced at the scouting report that Assistant Coach Sorg prepared but let's go over the notable threats we have to watch out for.

"First let's look at Takefusa Kubo their 18-year-old number 10." Coach Sorg stated as the LED screen in the locker room flickered to the image of a dark-haired Japanese player wearing his country's number 10. "He likes to utilize his low centre of gravity and pinpoint accuracy to deliver a perfect through ball for a critical goal. So, we will have to tighten up our zonal marking around him and try to break up any plays before he can get going."

"Next is Ayase Ueda whose versatile sense of the game perfectly matches Kubo as he is able to score with every part of his body. Our assignment for him is a tight man-to-man marking whenever they are on the attack use your physicality to your advantage and be smart." Coach Sorg stated as he started laying out some of the player's tendencies and his ability to rise above defenders for a towering header in set-piece situations.

"Finally, what we want you to pay attention to are their wings that will bring their attacks to life. Hiroki Abe on the left flank and Ritsu Doan on the right." Following his words the images of the two players appeared on the monitor. Ritsu Doan had the characteristic black hair that Japanese people have cut short in a slightly growing buzz cut. With his serious gaze in the picture, he resembled the samurais or ninjas that some of the players had seen in Japanese media.

Hiroki Abe on the other hand had an almost relaxed demeanor in comparison as he smiled brightly in his picture. The players subconsciously paid more attention to him as he had signed for the Barcelona organization this year. Despite it only being the B team it was only a step up to the main team from there. A large step no doubt but it was still easier than any other Barca hopeful around the world.

"First Ritsu Doan, he is by the very definition a big-game player, expect him to suddenly cut inwards and unleash a left-footed rocket into the top corner when he spots an opportunity." Following his words a

short clip played of Ritsu doing similar things in the J league catching not only defenders but also goalkeepers off guard.

"Next let's look at Hiroki one of the few young players who can be called a traditional winger. He is the type to deliver a cross into the box rather than go for a long shot, but his change of speed and his explosive acceleration has allowed him to be dominant." following his words another short clip of Hiroki using his speed to skip past his marker before delivering a pinpoint cross for a match-winning goal.

Seeing the players seriously paying attention to Coach Sorg's pre-match statistical breakdown, Coach Baum clapped his hands, gaining their attention. "Their attacking quartet will be dangerous on the counter but if we play our game, maintain possession and utilize our chances, we will walk away with 3 points. Now this is our starting lineup."

GK: Luca Unbehaun

RB: Simon Asta

CB: Armel Bella-Kotchap

CB: Kevin Ehlers

LB: Noah Katterbach

CDM: Angelo Stiller

CDM: Niklas Tauer

RM: Jamie Leweling

CAM: Rakim Rex

LM: Kevin Schade

ST: Lenn Jastremski

"Our two double pivots will be the most important in containing their counters. Niklas, I want you sticking to Takefusa Kubo like a bodyguard even if he goes to sleep you will be right there for when he wakes up." Coach Baum stated with enthusiasm as he made sure that Niklas understood his assignment.

"What if he goes for a dump coach?" Youssoufa suddenly shouted from the sidelines gaining a few amused chuckles from the rest of the boys. "Then you'll be there to hand him the toilet roll, he does not get to breathe without you giving him permission."

The room burst into another bout of laughter as Niklas's face quickly turned red. "Angelo I want you intercepting passes and use your vision to ping passes and give Rakim something to work with when the

game becomes stagnant," Coach Baum continued in a serious tone the moment the players quieted down giving the deep-lying playmaker more instructions.

"Rakim, I know it's an unfamiliar role but it's what we need from you today. Play smart and use that vision of yours to unlock attacking opportunities. Avoid dribbling too much for the first 15 minutes kids get over eager to prove themselves and you got a big target on your back." He started making eye contact with the young phenom that had fallen into his lap.

He had been satisfied with his work ethic and ability to adapt to their instructions. With how versatile he is added to his natural creativity makes him the perfect number ten for his squad. It's only too bad that the player was dam good on the wing which made it hard to blame coaches who utilised him there.

Despite his proven track record on the wing, he decided to follow his instincts and utilize him in the Attacking midfield role. What a squad like Germany didn't lack was talent in many roles around the pitch, what they need is a player that can make the most of the team. Your Toni Kross and Mesut Özil are perfect examples of field generals and architects of the German national team.

"Understood coach," Rakim simply answered as he pulled out a fresh pair of Ace 11 national team edition. The people at Apex had specially made them following his request for this mini World Cup campaign.

The shoe didn't change much but the colourway was in the German colors with Rakim's 22 on the outside of the boot. Stretching out the pair he quickly slipped his feet in them but didn't tie the laces right away as he stretched his toes to get a feel for them. Coach Baum didn't mind his actions as he continued giving players instructions on what to watch out for.

"Finally, Lenn you will play as a target man if they park the bus use your physicality to hold up play and dominate your matchups." He said with a smile making eye contact with Lenn who silently nodded in

response. "Alright you all know what to do, the mission hasn't changed, and the ball is still round so go have some fun out there."

"YES COACH!" the players exclaimed as they jumped up from their seats and headed for the exit.

Chapter 400 400 Vs Japan (1)

[Saturday, 26/10/2019, 19:20, Zdzisław-Krzyszowski-Stadion, Poland]

"Einigkeit und Recht und Freiheit

sind des Glückes Unterpfand

Blüh im Glanze dieses Glückes,

blühe, deutsches Vaterland!"

Singing the last lines of the German national anthem the crowd present at the Zdzisław-Krzyszowski-Stadion cheered as a resounding applause descended on the players. What followed was the regular pre-match pleasantries as the German players who are considered the away side walked past the refereeing team and the Japanese players shaking their hands in greeting. The Japanese contingent did the same shaking the hands of the referee before heading to their side for the official team photo.

The picture was taken quickly and Luca today's captain headed towards the referees for the coin toss. Exchanging their countries' pennants and shaking each other's hands and the officiating team they

proceeded with the coin toss. However, the cameraman wasn't focused on them as he had at some point zoomed in on Rakim Rex at the centre of the field.

"Well, we haven't seen that before Rakim will be playing in midfield," Paul Gartner said into the mic as the viewer count in the live broadcast continued to climb. Their streaming app had taken the leap and bid to stream this under-20 World Cup and struck gold when a few notable names decided to join.

While most of the young players were less known since they hadn't played senior football in the big leagues yet two names were an exception. The two English boy's Jude Bellingham who is considered the next big thing, and Bukayo Saka who made his Premier League debut this January. If that is not enough the hottest talent to come out of the football desert that is the United States is also participating in this tournament.

The hype of his participation is half the reason more people decided to pay attention to this tournament. That is why Paul Gartner wasn't surprised that currently, they had around 5 million people already tuning into this German opener and the numbers only continued rising.

None of this mattered to Rakim though as he kneeled down on the grass turf to tie his laces. In a moment similar to Maradona as the camera zoomed in capturing his boots in full glory. His hands moved elegantly almost in slow motion as he tied a double bow for lightly brushing his boot once he was done.

As Rakim stood up, the camera panned upwards, capturing his confident expression. Sending a quick wink towards the camera he turned forward with a more serious gaze before saying something to Angelo and Niklas as he dapped them up. They didn't have to wait long as the coin toss ended soon after with Japan winning the kick-off.

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[Saturday, 26/10/2019, 19:30, Zdzisław-Krzyszowski-Stadion, Poland]

"And we're underway here in Bydgoszcz!" Paul Gartner's voice rang out, full of enthusiasm. "Japan versus Germany in this Under-20 World Cup opener. Two teams packed with talent, but the spotlight undoubtedly falls on a few key players—Rakim Rex for Germany and Takefusa Kubo for Japan. Keep an eye on these two magicians in the middle of the park."

Ayase Ueda wasted no time knocking the ball back to Kubo following the referee's whistle as a tide of green Germany jerseys charged at them. The Japanese playmaker, undeterred by the onrushing pressure, flicked the ball to Ao Tanaka, who quickly shifted it wide to Daiki Sugioka on the left flank.

"Japan starting cautiously here, but they're moving the ball with purpose," Gartner observed as Jamie Leweling engaged in a fierce battle with Daiki who played it safe by knocking it back to Yuki Kobayashi.

Sending a quick pass to Takehiro Tomiyasu, Kobayashi re-cantered Japan's play. Tomiyasu took his time, assessing his options, and sprayed a long diagonal ball to Riku Handa on the right flank.

"That's a lovely switch from Tomiyasu," Gartner remarked. "Japan showing their technical prowess early on, keeping Germany on their toes."

Kevin Schade immediately closed down Handa, but the Japanese full-back was quick on his feet, feinting past Schade with a slick touch before driving up the field. He threaded a through ball toward Ritsu Doan, who had made a darting run into the right channel.

"Doan's on the move!" Gartner exclaimed. "This could be dangerous for Germany!"

But Niklas Tauer had other ideas. The towering defensive-minded midfielder surged forward, intercepting Doan's attempt to cut inside with a perfectly timed sliding tackle. Tauer quickly rose to his feet, calmly recycling possession with a short pass to Angelo Stiller. The German midfield duo began to dictate play, with Stiller dropping deeper to collect the ball and orchestrate from the back.

A quick one-two between Stiller and Bella-Kotchop opened up space for the Germans to advance. Rex slipped away from his marker on the halfway line dropping into open space on the left side in the blind side of Ao Tanaka. Stiller spotted his movement and sent a perfectly weighted pass into the half-space.

A defender quickly stepped up behind him ready to stop him then and there but Rakim nearly faked turning left before deftly turning right. Takuya Yasui was left reaching for air as he was a step too late to react leaving him frozen on the spot. Dribbling forward it looked like he would ignite a blistering dribble through the middle of the Japanese defence.

He did not though as he came to a sudden halt performing a quick L turn to dodge the slide tackle of the recovering Ao Tanaka. Not holding onto the ball, he sent a weighted pass to the left flank into the feet of Kevin Schade. The winger was quickly swarmed by Ritsu Doan and Riku Handa, the latter dropping deep to help defend against the German attack.

Schade hesitated for a moment as Ritsu Doan and Riku Handa closed in, their coordinated movement cutting off his immediate options. With a subtle shimmy, Schade shifted the ball onto his right foot and attempted a quick lofted pass over the Japanese defenders toward Lenn Jastremski, who had positioned himself between the centre-backs.

"Schade looking for Jastremski in the box," Gartner said, leaning into the tension of the moment.

But Takehiro Tomiyasu was alert to the danger, rising high to meet the pass with a firm header. The ball dropped into midfield, where Angelo Stiller was waiting to reclaim possession. Stiller controlled it calmly and nudged the ball sideways to Rakim, who had moved up the field but found himself surrounded by three Japanese players.

Unfazed by the pressure, performed a quick Cruyff turn to escape Tanaka's challenge before flicking the ball around Yasui with his next touch. As the crowd began to murmur in anticipation, Rex launched a powerful low-driven pass to Jamie Leweling on the right flank, threading the ball between two Japanese defenders with pinpoint precision.

Leweling controlled the pass effortlessly, driving toward the edge of the penalty area. Sugioka stepped in to cut off his path, but Leweling sold him a dummy, darting inside and setting himself up to shoot. Just as he unleashed a curling effort toward the far post, Kosei Tani sprang into action, diving to his right and pushing the ball wide with a strong hand.

"What a save by Tani!" Gartner shouted. "Germany knocking on the door, but the Japanese keeper says, 'Not today!'"

The ball rolled out for a corner, and as the German players jogged forward to crowd the Japanese penalty area, Rakim positioned himself to deliver the set piece. He raised a hand to signal his intent for an in-swing towards the back post area gaming for Bella-Kotchap and Niklas Tauer. The moment he received the signal from the referee he swung the ball in with pace and precision. Bella-Kotchap surged through the crowd, meeting the cross with a thunderous header, sending the ball towards goal with a dull thud.