

Football 431

Chapter 431 431 You're Welcome

Jens Petter Hauge, who was also reset, with a hopeful gaze as he took a deliberate breath trying to calm himself. Paul Gartner didn't care about their emotions and simply relished the drama knowing the views for the match's extended highlight would be immense. "Well, folks, the drama just doesn't stop here in Gdynia. Jens Petter Hauge gets a second bite at the cherry after a nerve-wracking first attempt. It's a lifeline for Norway, a moment of immense pressure for both shooter and goalkeeper. Let's see if Hauge can capitalize this time."

As the crowd's volume intensified, Hauge placed the ball on the penalty mark, took several deep breaths, and stepped back. Silence fell momentarily as the whistle blew, marking the resumption of this critical juncture. This time, Hauge took a second longer as Luca stood still on the line with his eyes wide like a cat and arms stretched wide, daring the Norwegian captain to shoot.

Hauge steadied himself, his boots lightly grazing the turf as he slowly made his run-up keeping eye contact with Luca in between the sticks. As he closed in on the ball he abruptly looked down as he struck the ball powerfully, aiming to outwit Unbehaun by changing his tactic—this time targeting the top left corner. Unbehaun, primed and focused, launched himself towards the ball, his instincts and reflexes at full display.

In the air, his gaze locked onto the ball bringing a palm to the ball and powerfully smacked it away as he crashed to the ground. "Luca Unbehaun!!!!" Paul Gartner's excited voice resounded as the German fans jumped to their feet in joy. The play wasn't over though as the figures of Rakim and Haaland could be seen chasing after the loose ball.

Both of them were fast causing their shoulder to clash for a moment but they both remained standing. Erling came out on top in that clash, but Rakim didn't fall too far behind as his legs continued to propel him forward. Just as Erling was about to reach the loose ball, he slid forward using his long legs to poke the ball before the striker could touch it.

The ball skittered out of play, and as Rakim stood up quickly, the referee blew the whistle for full-time. The German team erupted in celebration, a mix of relief and jubilation washing over them as they embraced each other on the pitch. The Norwegian players, meanwhile, collapsed in despair, their hopes dashed in the most dramatic fashion.

"And there it is! The final whistle blows and Germany survives a late scare to advance to the quarterfinals. What a match we've witnessed here today at Stadion GOSiR!" Paul Gartner commentated his voice faintly echoing over the throng of celebratory German fans.

Coach Baum rushed onto the field to join his players, congratulating them one by one, the smile on his face never leaving his face. He had already achieved more than his predecessors had by making it out of the group stage since the DFB youth teams aren't known for their strength. So, he treated the rest of the matches without much pressure as he simply wanted his players to give it their best and enjoy the game.

"Good game, your goals were something else," Erling stated with a melancholic smile as he reached out a hand to help Rakim get up from the ground.

"You can't say that after bulldozing through half our team to score a goal." Rakim retorted with a weird expression not understanding why someone who seems to be made for the sole purpose of scoring goals would complement one of his.

"Didn't you score from 30 yards out to win the match?" Erling retorted with an incredulous expression. "I did do that, didn't I? I guess I'm pretty great." Rakim commented with a wide grin seemingly remembering his goal after being reminded.

Erling laughed heartily at Rakim's response, his demeanour lightening despite the disappointment of the loss. "Yeah, you did. And it was one heck of a shot," he acknowledged, clapping Rakim on the shoulder as they both turned to acknowledge their respective fans who were still lingering in the stands, soaking up the aftermath of the intense match.

"Though you won't win our next meeting, I'll make sure to score a few more goals for good measures." He said with a serious gaze as his light-hearted demeanour instantly vanished as if it didn't exist in the first place. Rakim looking at him also fell silent for a second as his demeanour also turned serious locking gazes with the tall blond.

His green eyes seemed far more dangerous than before as his gait shifted resembling a jungle tiger ready to pounce at any moment. Just as it looked like things were ready to pop off between them a wide smile appeared on Rakim's face. "Hahaha, Okay, okay, okay, okay, Okay! I will be ready so give it your best shot," Rakim's words sounded light-hearted, but Haaland was not mistaken that the player in front of him wanted all the smoke and in fact looked forward to the challenge.

Haaland, matching Rakim's grin with one of his own, nodded appreciatively. "I will, don't worry. The Bundesliga I will Conquer," he said with a reassuring grin as he took off his top handing it to Rakim. "You're welcome,"

Rakim accepted it and proceeded to sign the kit before handing it back to Erling with a wide grin as he slung an arm around his neck. "Where did you even get a pen from?" was the only thing Haaland thought to ask as he looked at his own jersey now signed by Rakim.

"I always stay ready for my fans," Rakim replied with a cheeky smile as they walked towards the tunnel. "Sign mine if you manage to beat me,"

Erling laughed, taking the challenge in stride, "Deal but don't run away when the time comes,"

Rakim merely chuckled at his words not taking them seriously in the least. "Run? From you? Never." With a final pat on Haaland's back, they separated, each heading to their team's respective side of the pitch. Both were surprised to find a player in their generation that was just as competitive as the other.

As the players disappeared into the tunnel, the stadium slowly began to empty, fans went out to financially support local watering holes. Still broadcasting live, Paul Gartner summarised their feelings, "What a day for football here in Gdynia. This match was a rollercoaster of emotions, but in the end, Germany advances to the quarterfinals. Norway has shown they are a force to be reckoned with and I am excited over their future. This tournament is far from over, and if today's game is any indication, we're in for an exhilarating ride."

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"Jens, do you believe that if Erling had taken the penalty, the match would have gone differently?" a reporter asked the Norwegian captain as he walked past the press area in the tunnel. Already feeling bad about disappointing his team, Jens's mood dropped further upon hearing this.

That wasn't the only question thrown his way. Quite a few reporters shot their questions his way, each one more targeted and hurtful. Jens paused; his pride not willing to let him escape from these vultures. Plus, he knew that if he didn't, they would paint the sky red with his blood tomorrow.

"I think it's not just about who takes the penalty. It's about executing at the moment," Jens responded, his voice steady despite the turmoil he felt. "Erling is an incredible player, we all know that, but today, it was on me. I took the responsibility, and unfortunately, it didn't go our way."

The flurry of questions continued, each reporter seemingly trying to get their punches or sound bite in. "Why would you fight for the right to take the set piece in such a crucial match when your teammate has been firing on all cylinders making him this tournament top scorer by a wide margin?"

Another reporter asked, already imagining the headlines: Norway Captain Chooses Pride over team win. "No comment," Jens retorted. He immediately turned on his heels and left without sparing the disappointed vultures a second glance.

Chapter 432 432 Decimation

After a nerve-wracking victory that had propelled Germany into the quarterfinals of the Under-20 World Cup, the team found itself in Kraków, gearing up for the next challenge. Amid the rigorous training schedules and tactical briefings, the team was granted a much-needed day off allowing them to recharge and refocus. Most players decided to spend it with their family members who had travelled to support them or spend the day relaxing in the Hilton hotels wellness suit.

The likes of Kevin Schade, Lenn Jastremski, and Wirtz chose to go out and conquer the city, but Rakim could easily tell they were up to no good. He didn't bother with them though as he had something more important to do which was to spend quality time with his girlfriend. She had been in the same city as him, but he had barely seen her due to the team's restrictions.

He couldn't clock out at the end of the day like in Leverkusen and had to live with the rest of the team. That's why when the break was announced he immediately scheduled something with May. Just like their last date in Bydgoszcz, they started the day in a quaint little cafe where they enjoyed some local pastries and coffee.

In Rakim's case, he only had coffee with the occasional borrowing of May's cheesecake whenever an opportunity presented itself. As an athlete, his diet has been something he has worked hard to maintain but his only vice was cakes. For some reason despite hating the taste of a chocolate bar, he couldn't say no to a slice.

Their relationship hadn't really changed much since they started dating, the only difference was that their feelings were no longer unspoken. They were still each other's best friends talking about everything and anything no matter how little and stupid. Honesty had become the foundation of their relationship as May was the only other person outside his family who could call his BS.

That is why he refrained from bragging just in case she would decide to call him on his BS and prove it. Sometimes it worked out through sheer luck but more often than not he'd only embarrass himself. His ego wouldn't let him back down even when exposed leading to some comical life lessons growing up.

At this very moment, the two could be seen seated in the corner of a cafe deeply intertwined in a conversation. Rakim wore a simple white 2Pac T-shirt paired with faded jeans and clean white Adidas sneakers, his look complete with a small gold pendant and his gold-tipped dreads tied in a messy bun. May wore waist-high navy-blue jeans, a crisp white blouse that hung loosely over her frame, and red Converse sneakers that added a pop of colour to her outfit.

Her peach blond hair was pulled back into a neat ponytail, highlighting her dark green eyes and the subtle makeup that accentuated her features. "You know I almost got into a fight with two of your legions of female fans over a street artist fan painting of you," May said in indignation as she took the last bite of her caramel cheesecake.

"That bitch tried to justify stealing the picture I asked the guy to draw for me by saying she'll use it to propose to you. In front of me your girlfriend, can you believe the nerve," She questioned causing Rakim to subconsciously nod only to quickly shake it in the end.

"The nerve," Was the only thing he could muster saying as she continued detailing how she almost got into a fistfight with 3 girls over his kit that had been sullied by a street artist. "Wait a minute when did you steal- ahem borrow one of my kits?"

"That's not important, since I already told you I might as well show you my surprise right now." She exclaimed in annoyance and reluctance as if she wasn't the one who had leaked her surprise without prompt.

Reaching out her phone she pulled out a picture of his white German national team kit. On the back, the black 22 was encased in golden colour as the street artist had drawn highlights of his most famous goals. Looking at it Rakim could easily tell how much effort May herself had put in as some of the goals used were not the most famous but ones that meant the most to him.

The centre one was a drawing of him with his arms spread wide dressed in a red oak Jersey reminding him of his first and only state cup. Smiling widely at the memory, Rakim leaned closer to inspect the detail, his heart warming at the thoughtfulness of her gift. "May, this is amazing. Thank you,"

She grinned, pleased with his reaction. "I wanted you to have something to remember this tournament other than the gold medal. Plus, a reminder of how far you have come won't hurt right."

Seeing her bright smile Rakim reached across the table to squeeze her hand and said, "Thank you, babe. This means a lot to me. More than any trophy." Smiling he placed a short kiss on her cheek before proceeding to check out her present on her phone screen already yearning for the real thing.

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Their day continued with a stroll around Kraków, exploring the picturesque streets and enjoying the vibrant atmosphere of the city. They stopped at various street vendors, trying different snacks and laughing at each other's reactions to the unfamiliar tastes. They had both been here for the better half of a month, but their pallet still hadn't adjusted to the Polish cuisine.

Rakim, despite his strict diet, allowed himself the freedom to indulge a little, sharing bites of May's zapiekanka and oscypek much to the latter's annoyance. She would try to get him to buy his own share only for him to refuse to spout some nonsense about his diet only to take a bit out of Her's. They visited the Kraków castle and Kraków Mound as they enjoyed the scenic sights and learned a little about the city's history.

As the afternoon faded into early evening, they decided to cap their day off by catching the England vs Panama match at the Tychy City Stadium. Despite their best intentions, time slipped away as they wandered through the historic streets of Kraków, enjoying each other's company.

Finally, realizing they were running late, Rakim and May hurried to the Tychy City Stadium. England would be the last team to play their round of 16 today and since it happened to be in the city they had decided to finish their date here. As they approached the stadium, the subdued noise puzzled them it was unusual for this competition which had been hyped up and quite a lot of fans had gotten involved in supporting their teams.

They rushed through the gates, their tickets scanned in a blur, and as they emerged into the stands, they were met with an unusual silence hanging over the stadium. The scoreboard told the story before they even found their seats: England 3, Panama 0. The game had clearly been one-sided, and they had missed the flurry of goals that had put England firmly in control.

Settling into their seats, Rakim and May took in the scene. The stadium, though filled with fans, had a subdued atmosphere as the English team expertly controlled the game, their dominance apparent. On the field, the English players moved the ball with ease, their confidence unshaken as they toyed with the Panamanian team's attempts to rally a comeback. The scary thing is that they had barely played 15 minutes into the match and it was already pretty much over.

Chapter 433 433 Let Me Land

[Tychy City Stadium, 18:00, England U-20 vs. Panama -20 – Round of 16]

After the initial shock of the scoreline, Rakim and May adjusted to the atmosphere in Tychy City Stadium. Although they had missed the early goals, the stadium was buzzing with a mix of excitement from English fans and a palpable sense of resignation among the few Panama supporters. Quickly finding their seats they snuggled into each other's embrace for warmth as they took in the relaxed ambience.

"They really didn't hold back, huh?" May commented, nodding towards the English players who were moving with an almost lazy swagger performing a few skill moves as they moved the ball among their ranks. It wasn't that they were making fun of their opponents, quite the opposite they just gelled so well with each other that it came naturally.

Surprisingly, the two youngest of the 3 lions were pulling the strings as in the centre of the field a light-skinned lad with a short afro could be seen ping-ponging passes with ease. He moved with such ease between the enemy lines dictating where the ball went from older players like a born field general. Slightly ahead of him playing the number 10 role was another 16-year-old kid donning England's number 10.

If Jude was the team's heart and engine, this boy named Musial was the sole as he easily broke past opponents with his messianic touches. Just like the Argentinian, he didn't use a lot of skill moves but instead used his lower sense of gravity coupled with his quick first steps to glide past players. "He reminds me of you, not now but when you first started playing" May suddenly whispered into his ear as they two watched Musial escape from the encirclement of 3 players as he dribbled to the left side of the box.

Rakim didn't respond right away as he watched the young maestro cut back before delivering a missile of a pass across the box. Greenwood mistimed his run, and his following swing was too hard sending the ball rocketing into the stands. A burst of disappointed sighs resounded within the lion's stands followed by encouraging claps. No one seemed to care how the Panama side felt as they prayed to God to deliver themselves from this calamity.

"No, he is better suited to that style of dribbling compared to me," Rakim responded seriously as he watched the three lions regroup for another attack. His centre of gravity is much lower than mine. It used to work for me, but as I started to grow taller and stronger, so I modelled my style after my hero and the Brazilian magician."

"It feels like you're taller every time I see you," May quipped leaving his embrace to sit up straight to check their height difference. "Maybe you should have played basketball instead,"

"Naw I'll stick to football, but you can't go complaining about my height when you're easily 5'10," Rakim retorted with a light smile pulling her back into his embrace not ready to let go of the warmth. "Plus, my body just wanted to be taller than you so I should stop growing soon,"

"Hahah, as if I heard tall footballers have an easier time on the field, look just like that guy," she said as she pointed at one of the tall Panamanian defenders bodying Greenwood in an ariel duel as he cleared the ball with a header.

"Sure, height helps in the sport but past a certain point, it becomes a hindrance if you don't rigorously drill your body to adapt. If I don't stop growing, I might have to become a midfielder or a centre forward which wouldn't be fun at all," Rakim lamented with a sigh not at all liking the prospect of growing further, luckily Eva had assured him that he had reached his natural growth cycle.

"Why though? Knowing you, you would enjoy having more of the ball and would also score more goals as a striker," May asked with a worried gaze as she seemed to be contemplating what she should do to comfort him just in case he had to give up his favourite position. Despite not fully paying attention over the years she had heard Emma talk about how her brother's coaches had tried multiple times to get him to change positions.

Rakim chuckled softly, squeezing May's hand reassuringly. "Playing up front might indeed mean more goals, but there's something special about wing play for me. I love the freedom, the space to run, and the chance to outmanoeuvre defenders one-on-one. It's just where I feel at home on the pitch."

What he failed to mention was the fact he enjoyed the adoration player on the wing got for having the freedom to let their creativity bloom. In the middle of the field, one had to worry that the slightest mistake or the heroics of the opposing player could lead to a deadly counter. That is why coaches preferred stable midfielders rather than your Kaka's who are creatively gifted players who are prone to take risks.

It wasn't by mistake that the number ten role was being phased out for a more balanced midfield dynamic as teams realised by giving the wings more freedom and establishing the centre they became more efficient in the final third. For Rakim it wasn't even a question if he didn't get to play the game his own way, he would quickly lose his joy for the game.

Following a team's tactic is different from being unable to play your brand of football. The key lies in finding ways to exert your own skills, playstyle and understanding off football to fit in your team's tactical framework. Players who realised this early on tend to thrive wherever they went drawing praise as they achieved success.

It's not that they are not good enough to force the team's tactical framework to shift to better fit around them they just realised they don't have time to wait a few years for that to happen. That is the sole reason why players like CR7, Zlatan, and Christian Panucci, with the latter winning multiple trophies across Italy with As Roma and AC Milan. He even managed to win Milan a Champions League in 94 only to go on and win it again with the Galactico's in 97.

Seeing his contemplating something May spoke up again, "It doesn't matter I will come to watch you play no matter what position. Even if God forbid you on the bench I'll come to as many games as possible,"

Hearing her words a warm sensation appeared in Rakim's chest threatening to break free as he subconsciously leaned down to kiss the top of her head. "You should come more 'cause I play 10x better when you're watching.

"Oh, shut up that's not a real thing, who could my watching from the sideline make you play better?" She questioned her deep green eyes locking don't his light ones searching for the answer in his eyes.

Trust me it's real how else do you think Max managed to get picked up by a professional team in Spain? The scout just happened to attend the matches max spotted Baddies at the side turning him into a monster on the pitch," Rakim explained with a slight smile remembering his friend who turned into prime Messi and Ronaldinho whenever a pretty girl was on the sidelines.

"Baddies huh?" May questioned with slight displeasure as she arched an eyebrow, but Rakim didn't seem to hear it as he continued.

"Huh, yh he called it the Jordan pool effect after watching the basketball player ball out on March madness after seeing Kylie and her crew on the sidelines," Rakim replied with a matter-of-fact tone as he watched the U-20 England squad take a free kick. "I never understood why but that's why we used to get Lexi to bring her volleyball and gymnast friends to watch our matches."

"Hmm, now that I think about it you never once asked us or specifically me to watch your matches. It was always Emma asking me to accompany her or your Lisa and Ben asking if we were coming," She asked again her mood dropping further as she seemed to have peaked beneath a vale that had been in front of her for the longest time. "You only asked me to watch your final and when you finally went pro."

No matter how dense or absorbed he was by Jude who sent the freekick crashing against the Pana Bar he realised what was going on. Like the experienced captain of the Titanic who was simply minding his business when an iceberg decided to ruin his day his survival instincts immediately kicked in as he looked for ways to navigate this storm.

"Calm down bae let me land,"

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"Calm down bae let me land, let me land," He quickly said as his brain worked overtime trying to piece together how he had ended up in this situation. "What I'm trying to say is that you're a baddie and when I know you're in the stands or I see you I play better. I'm not weird like Max who only plays well at seeing random girls I already play at the highest level possible for me every game,"

Taking a short pause to glance at her still piercing gaze he knew that more action was needed to land this plane. "I never asked you to come watch my matches because I didn't want you giving Max a boost. I felt embarrassed asking so I always made Emma come watch me knowing she would bring you. Worker smarter not harder plus I didn't like you when I first met you,"

"Excuse me?" May exclaimed looking like she was ready to interrogate him for the nuclear launch codes. "Rakim Simon Rex what do you mean you didn't like me, you better explain yourself,"

Looking at her angry pout Rakim couldn't help but chuckle in response, "Haha, not liking you is not quite right, I found you annoying is more like it. I was especially jealous of how close you and Emma were. She was my sister but also my only friend and you would drag her everywhere throughout that summer,"

"However, I came to tolerate you towards the end of the summer only after you slipped and landed face-first into Emma's birthday cake," Rakim casually continued with a calm expression as if he wasn't talking to his girlfriend but a random friend.

"Gee, how lucky I am. And you all promised to wipe that incident from your memory," May retorted with clear indignation in her tone. "So, when did you start developing feelings for me?" she carefully asked after noticing that he wouldn't be forgetting that memory anytime soon.

Rakim's chuckle softened as he saw the genuine curiosity mixed with a hint of annoyance in May's eyes. He took a moment to collect his thoughts, knowing that this conversation treaded into deeper waters that he somehow found himself trudging in. "Well, it wasn't one specific moment," he started, his voice taking on a more serious tone. "It was a bunch of little things over time. But the moment I realised I cared for you as more than just a friend was the night you got drunk at the country club and we had to sneak you home."

"Not romantic at all, how was I being a drunk mess what made you start liking me? I don't remember that night much, but I do recall the shitstorm afterwards Jen had me grounded for weeks," She retorted shuddering lightly as she recalled how angry her stepmom had been upon learning the truth from Mrs Rex.

"Well, it wasn't holding your hair up while you vomited that made me like you, neither was it slabbering all over my limited-edition Kimono PJs. Hmm, come to think of it, you never did replace my Akatsuki Kimono," Rakim suddenly stopped mid-speech as he seemed to remember something he had overlooked in the hustle and bustle of that night.

"Hey never mind that stay on track and if you mention another embarrassing memory I will book it out of here and become a nun at some temple at some Himalayan temple." May quickly interjected not willing to let him know what happened with that Kimono that she found so soft to the point of stealing it.

"Anyways before that night, you were just another of Emma's rich bratty friends who always seemed to get into trouble for no reason," Rakim started causing her brows to knit almost standing up to begin her

pilgrimage. "Calm down I'm about to land. Don't know if you remember but that night after Emma fell asleep and I helped you to the toilet to vomit we talked."

Rakim saw the confusion flicker across May's face as she tried to recall the details of that night, her expression softening as she focused on his words. "Wait I thought I imagined that since we didn't really talk after that night since we all got grounded?" she asked, her tone curious, as she had remembered something like that but couldn't recall the details.

"It was mostly you crying about missing your mom and being angry at your dad, but we talked for like 3 hours straight. It wasn't anything too deep, but it made me see another side of you, a genuine you, who wasn't trying to impress anyone or keep up appearances. You were just... raw and honest." Rakim told her as he started detailing all the different things they talked about from their hopes and dreams to their fears.

Rakim's recollection of that night seemed to draw a long-lost memory from the corners of May's mind. She nodded slowly; her expression pensive as the conversation fragments started returning to her. "I remember being really upset, and you... you just listened. Oh god did I really fall asleep on you, that can't be right by the time I woke up you were gone,"

"Batman doesn't stick around for a victory lap," he retorted with a light smile as he thought of how much body control, he had to use to lift both of them from the ground and gently place her on the carpet.

May rolled her eyes at Rakim's quip but couldn't suppress a smile. "You think you're very funny, don't you?" she teased, nudging him playfully with her shoulder. "But honestly, that means a lot to me... that you stayed. I don't remember everything from that night, but I do remember feeling safer, but why did you distance yourself afterwards?"

She had been considering this question since listening to him recall what had happened that night. From what he told her they had genuinely connected and if it was her, she wouldn't have let that friendship go. "I didn't at first, but you went back to being destructive and were nothing like the girl I met that night. All ended well though we became friends and now we're together,"

May took in Rakim's explanation, processing his words and the emotions they stirred within her. She sighed a mix of relief and lingering frustration in her breath. "I guess I understand," she said slowly. "It was a tough time for me, and I wasn't at my best. I'm glad you saw something worth sticking around for and let me discover who I want to be for myself."

"Always, plus you weren't all bad," Rakim commented glancing away from her intense gaze as he focused on the field again. "Like that one time, you somehow convinced us all to go to a gator park because you got it into your head that you weren't brave enough,"

May laughed, a sound filled with warmth as the memory surfaced. "Oh, that was a disaster! I can't believe you all actually came with me. I was terrified of those things, but I was too proud to back out once we got there."

Rakim smiled, his eyes twinkling with amusement as he remembered the day. "Yeah, you were trying to act all tough but quickly became honest once you saw one of them chomp down on fish."

He laughed softly, the sound mixing with the memories that floated back to them. "You were holding onto my arm so tight; I thought you were going to cut off my circulation. But you went through with it, even fed one of them, despite being scared out of your mind."

Before May could respond the stands filled with the 3 Lions fans exploded from their celebrating in ecstasy. "Goooooooooal!!!" The sudden uproar around them snapped May and Rakim out of their bubble,

turning their attention back to the game. The scoreboard now flashed an even more dominating score as England had extended their lead, in dominant fashion.

May watched as the players celebrated, "Sorry I thought this game would be more interesting for our date," she commented, with a slight disappointment as he watched the downcast expressions of the Panama players. "It doesn't really matter what we do, next time let's go rock climbing or hiking I see enough football as it is on a regular."

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[10/11/2019, 6:30]

Rakim awoke to the shrill sound of his phone blasting the song Surge, which he had set for that day's alarm at exactly 6:30 a.m. The three minutes the song would play are his final minutes of rest for the day, and he usually lets the whole song play out as he gathers his thoughts. Opening his eyelids, he saw the soft light of dawn creep into his hotel room, illuminating the half-packed sports bag on the floor.

He lingered under the warm blanket for a moment, recalling the events of the previous day: the date with May, then watching England annihilate Panama 5–1. But the sweet memory of the date quickly gave way to what had to be done today. He was now just hours away from the quarterfinal match against the U.S. a country that he dreamed of representing on the international stage someday.

The chants of 'USA, USA, USA,' as he charges down the flank or the burst of cheers whenever he produces a goal. Americans are some of the most passionate sports fans in the world and now he would have to end their dream of this title. The two figures of Yunus and Reyna flashed in his mind causing his brows to furrow not knowing how he would face his first friends he made through the game.

"Is it time already," Wirtz's groggy voice sounded from the bed next to him snapping him out of his thoughts just as BillionDoollarBaby rapped the final verses. Snapping his hand to his phone rakim stopped the alarm before the song could repeat itself.

"Yh time to get to work," he responded as he kicked up his blanket and swung his feet around so he could sit up at the side of the bed. His feet naturally slid into the sliders he had at the side of the bed as he looked up to face Wirtz who mirrored his movements.

"You know I never thought I train more at this tournament than in the academy," He complained taking off his stripped schlafmuetze and slapping his cheeks lightly before standing as he headed for his bag to get his things ready.

"No one is forcing you, plus most of it is just recovery work and body calibration exercises," Rakim retorted with a light smile before kneeling on his bed as he clasped his hands to pray. Growing up in a Christian family where they went to church every Sunday even visiting gospels in other cities if he was travelling for games and tournaments praying came naturally to him.

Having experienced something supernatural that couldn't be explained by science his belief in God was that much more strengthen. Most of all he appreciated the comfort he felt knowing that his life had meaning and that someone cared enough to give him a second chance. 1 Corinthians 2:3 "And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling"

He spent 5 minutes praying before he got to his feet with an excited expression as he faced a ready Wirtz who had just stepped out of the bathroom. Nodding at him grabbing his toiletry bag he made his way to the bathroom to brush his teeth, go through his skincare routine and apply the essential oils his hair needs to keep them healthy and smelling great.

[6:45]

After finishing his morning routine, Rakim emerged from the bathroom feeling renewed. Wirtz, who was already scrolling through his phone, threw on a hoodie and gestured toward the door.

"Time to head down?" he asked, rubbing his eyes.

Rakim nodded. "Yeah, let's get that light workout in before breakfast."

They stepped out into the quiet hallway, greeted only by the distant hum of air-conditioning. The corridors of the hotel, which were usually filled with jovial chatter and footsteps throughout the day, now felt almost tranquil at such an early hour.

[6:50 – Hotel Gym]

Rakim and Wirtz entered the small but neatly arranged fitness centre. The faint smell of disinfectant hung in the air; a few overhead lights buzzed softly. A pair of treadmills occupied one corner, while a rack of free weights lined the far wall. Without further delay, Rakim placed his phone on the edge of a bench and set up his yoga mat on the centre floor.

He began with a few cobra stretches the steady rhythm of his breathing guiding his muscles to wake up. Wirtz followed him in the stretches as they both alternated in leading them through it. His teammate despite being half asleep still managed to talk his ear off about various topics from football to a certain girl he had been crushing on.

"Dude how is it you can dribble past grown men and make them hit emotes trying to stop you but you can't get past a girl's glance," Rakim asked him after listening to him complain for the umpteenth time

about this mystery girl he liked for the longest time. "You miss every shot you don't take and only cowards think that by waiting the girl will come to them,"

Wirtz nearly toppled over mid-stretch as he heard Rakim's words. He fixed his friend with a mock glare before a grin stole over his face. "That's rich coming from the guy who had his girl fly over to watch him play in a FIFA tournament and hasn't stopped smiling since."

Rakim laughed, rolling his shoulders before sliding into a forward fold. "What can I say my girl is the best, funny thing is I didn't even ask her to come so you could say I'm blessed." He paused, letting a deep breath in. "I get what you're feeling though, and it can go bad if it doesn't work out but at least I took my shot. It's better to know than keep wondering the what-ifs in life, plus you are not that ugly that it would scare her away. Just don't bring her around me, one look at this face in person and it's game over,"

Wirtz snorted, pushing off from his stretch with a playful shove. "In your dreams, my friend. She'd only see you and think, 'What's that clown doing on a football pitch?'"

Rakim chuckled in response, "More like why is B. Jordan's younger, better-looking brother looking doing the most on the field,"

"More like your ego is doing too much," Wirtz retorted before continuing, "But I will ask her once I make the national team,"

"Good for you now be silent so I can focus please," Rakim retorted with a Hupf as he continued with a child pose earning a bout of laughter from his friend. They both laughed as they continued their light exercise.

Once they'd finished their stretches, Wirtz moved on to some light dumbbells while Rakim focused on a few balance drills—standing on one foot on a balance board. This device was just a flat surface with a bouncy ball surface designed to strengthen core strength and balance. He stood there absolutely still with a slight knee bend as he focused on his breathing.

He kept his arms at his side using his toes to keep his balance no matter how much his muscles urged him to explode forward. He did this for 3 minutes before switching legs, doing different poses as he engaged his core to hold the stance. After a couple of sets, they both hopped onto the treadmills for a quick jog. The gentle whirl of the machines filled the quiet gym, with only the noise of Wirtz's music connected to the gym's Bluetooth system resounding.

Chapter 436 436 Game Day (2)

[10/11/2019, 7:30]

By the time they left the gym, the sun was shining a bit brighter through the hotel windows, and the hallways felt less deserted. Rakim and Wirtz made their way to their rooms to take quick showers before they met again to head downstairs for breakfast. Rakim showered first as Wirtz decided to call up his family who had made the trip up to watch him play in today's game.

Rakim stepped into the bathroom, the heated floor a welcomed presence as he hopped into the shower. Turning the tap to cold chilling water hit his muscles the next second sending an exhilarating shiver through his being, as he let out a contented sigh. His thoughts quickly drifted to the match that night and what he wanted to achieve getting his mind ready.

Memories of training with Yunus and Reyna at various youth camps, as they talked about one day winning the World Cup for the States one day. Since football was the least popular sport in their country one World Cup could change this. After all being champion of the biggest sport in the world brings a certain prestige that no domestic league can bring.

They shared the dream of stardom wanting to be the Maradona's or Pele's in their respective countries as they pioneered the game. Now, ironically, they'd be facing off on one of the biggest youth stages of their lives so far. He couldn't help but wonder how it would all play out.

"Focus," he muttered to himself, scrubbing shower gel off his body once again letting the cold water temper his being. "This is the game. They're my brothers off the field but today their nothing else but obstacles on my path to the finals."

Stepping out of the shower, he quickly dried off as he dressed in casual team gear and took off his shower cap. Then he grabbed his phone and headed back into the room letting Wirtz have his turn.

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[8:00 – USA U-20 Team Hotel]

The first rays of morning sunlight barely crept through the hotel curtains when Yunus Musah groggily reached out to silence his alarm. He blinked away sleep, staring at the ceiling for a few moments before forcing himself upright. A deep sigh escaped him as he rubbed his face, already feeling the weight of the day ahead.

"Game day," he muttered to himself.

Across the room, Gio Reyna stirred at the sound of Yunus shifting in bed. He cracked an eye open and groaned, rolling onto his stomach in an attempt to ignore the world for a few more minutes.

"Man, why do we have to wake up so early?" Reyna grumbled; his voice muffled by the pillow.

Yunus chuckled, already swinging his legs over the edge of the bed. "It's 8 a.m., bro. Not even that early. We gotta get moving."

"Nah, five more minutes," Reyna said, already sinking deeper into the mattress.

Yunus smirked, grabbing his pillow and smacking Reyna on the head. "Get up, lazy ass. We got a game to win."

Reyna groaned but finally sat up, rubbing his eyes. "Yeah, yeah. I'm up." He yawned and stretched, his mind slowly registering the significance of the day.

Facing Germany in the quarterfinals was a challenge in itself, but knowing Rakim would be on the other side of the pitch made it even more intense. He was their friend, but they felt betrayed by his choices despite understanding the reason behind them. The feeling of being rejected for some seemingly better-looking girl or in this instance team wasn't something they could let go of.

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[8:30 – Breakfast]

The USA squad gathered in the hotel's dining area, the atmosphere a mix of sleepiness and nervous energy. Plates were piled with scrambled eggs, toast, fruit, and oatmeal as players fuelled up for the long day ahead. Yunus and Reyna found their seats, digging into their meals while engaging in small talk with teammates.

Across the table, Matteo Smith stirred his spoon through a bowl of oatmeal, his mind clearly elsewhere. A deep furrow sat between his brows, and he barely acknowledged the conversation flowing around him.

"You good, Matt?" Yunus asked, nudging him lightly.

Matteo blinked and looked up as if just realizing he was being spoken to. "Yeah... Wait did you just call me Matt? We are not that close,"

"Dude, you need to loosen up, all that brooding like some emo protagonist is getting real old. Like we get it your hot shit with a sad back story, at some point, you gone need to accept that we are teammates," Yunus said mid-bite with a relaxed expression as he munched down on his scrambled eggs and bacon as if he didn't just poke the bear.

Matteo's eyes narrowed slightly, and he set his spoon down with a clink against the bowl. He sighed, but after a moment, his expression softened, "Just do your job and don't hold me back," he replied, his voice low. "And it's Matteo to you always, remember that."

The tension at the table eased somewhat after Matteo's curt reply, but the underlying stress of the upcoming game lingered. Yunus shrugged, not wanting to push his teammate further, and turned his attention back to his breakfast, keen to fuel up properly.

[9:00 - Team Meeting Room]

After breakfast, the USA U-20 team gathered in one of the hotel's meeting rooms for a final tactical session. Coach Tab Ramos stood at the front with a digital board showing their opponent's typical formations and key players.

"Today's match is more than just a game," Coach Ramos began, his voice serious as he scanned everyone present from players to coaches. "Germany is a strong team, but so are we. We've prepared for this, and we know what we need to do."

He clicked on a slide showing Rakim and his recent play stats. "Rakim is one of their key threats. 9 goals, and 5 assists put him second on the scoring table just behind that Norwegian striker who managed to score 12 goals in 4 games. We know his capabilities, and we need to be vigilant. Don't give him space to operate."

Coach Ramos continued to outline their strategy, focusing on maintaining tight coverage of Rakim and disrupting Germany's midfield flow. "Press them hard, disrupt their rhythm, and when we regain possession, transition quickly. We've got the speed and skill to break them down," he emphasized, pointing to specific areas on the digital board where they should look to exploit Germany's defensive gaps in transition.

The players listened intently, nodding in agreement and murmuring amongst themselves about the game plan. Matteo, who had been silent since the breakfast encounter, leaned forward, his gaze fixed on the screen displaying Rakim's stats. His expression narrowed as he looked at the 9 goals scored comparing them to his 7, clenching his fist in frustration.

"Matteo, I want you sitting on Kevin Ehlers on their defensive line, he is prone to making irrational movements in the heat of the game. Usually, Bella-Kotchop acts as a libero for his defensive line, but I believe that whether it is strength, skill or game IQ you far surpass him. Go make him earn his stripes for every second he is on the field," Coach Ramos said when he reached the point of how he wanted his team to attack. Matteo simply nodded as he locked gazes with the image of Kevin watching how he moved in their last Game when Haaland charged forward.

"All right, you have 2 hours off, stay in the hotel, relax do what you need to do to get ready we will have lunch sharply at 12:30 before officially starting our pre-match preparation. Be smart and don't go doing something I would do, win on me win on 3," Coach Ramos loudly exclaimed prompting everyone in the room to exclaim win once he finished his 3,2,1 countdown.

"WIN!!!"

Chapter 437 437 Mr Money Man

[10/11/2019, Stadion GOSiR, 16:30]

As the sun dipped below the horizon, casting long shadows over the stadium, the tension in the air was palpable. The roar of the crowd could already be heard as the German and USA teams arrived at the venue for one of the most anticipated matches of the tournament. The event runners had done their best to hype up the confrontation between the two teams especially the beef rakim held with Team USA.

The fact one of the most prolific talents to ever come out of the US was not only snubbed but instead decided to represent a traditional powerhouse country wasn't something they would let go of. At the start of the tournament, they had held back since it wasn't certain that both teams would even meet but now things were different. The moment they realised both countries would clash the media frenzy went off the rails to the point some mainstream sports news outlets picked it up.

It was mostly used as a passing topic when looking for content, but it made for a good discussion when Oliver Burke Matteo's agent stirred the pot. The man could be seen going on press runs talking about how his protege would destroy Germany and their 'overhyped players'. Similar to certain Ball Father spots outlets brought him on to hold discussion due to his confidence and controversial comments.

"Pleasure doing business with you the Money has been wired," A well-dressed man in a Hugo Boss suit said with a bright smile as he shook hands with an equally well-dressed Oliver Burke. "The pleasure is all mine, Simon, now about that deal we were talking about,"

"All in good time the boss wants to see how this tournament turns out, we don't usually give out big contracts to defenders but if he is as good as you claim we will make an exception," Simon responded with a neutral business like expression but if he was being honest he did not care in the least.

As the personal assistant of Mike Parker, the Famed NIKI CEO who had taken the company to new heights in the past decade, he had dealt with plenty of people trying to go through him for benefits. However, Oliver's case was different since they had approached him to get Matteo to join Team USA for their little game so he couldn't outright dismiss him. Since the man had completed his end of the bargain by going on a media run hyping up his players and putting down Rakim's achievements on their behalf tolerating him was the least he could do.

"You're right, we should probably hold off on Matteo's contract renewal until the end of the season, he will be tired after this tournament and will want to focus on club football," Oliver said with a light smile, adjusting his glasses as he watched Simons Jaw clench ever so slightly.

Oliver wasn't a fool in the least otherwise he couldn't have survived in this business with only the bare minimum of a law degree. He had clawed his way out of Ladbroke Grove in London and made something out of himself using a simple set of rules. Business is only worth it as long as it achieves results and applies pressure on whatever leverage you have.

In this case, his leverage was Matteo's 4-year contract he had signed with Niki and while it was a lucrative contract at the time it no longer matched his player's value. He had firmly broken into Valencia's 1st team and started delivering convincing performances not just in the league but also in this tournament. While the result of this competition won't matter much it still showcased his potential against the best players in his generation.

He was in the second year of his contract but with only a buy-out clause of 10 million upon achieving certain results which he had completed it was NIKI who were at risk of losing him. A player like Matteo on a youth endorsement deal was laughable and they had been clamouring to renew it following his performance, but Oliver was holding off wanting to milk the most benefits out of this situation.

"Don't wait too long, we just green-lit 3 long contracts for players in this tournament after our max contact with genuine from PSG. There are quite a few promising players in this tournament one has already been confirmed for the Norwegian goal machine and the other for England's little maestro so if Matteo doesn't want the last spot we will branch out," Simon coolly said looking gazes with Oliver sending a clear message that if he kept pushing them they would flip the table.

Much to his surprise, Oliver wasn't shaken and simply nodded in agreement. "Those are good choices; you might want to look at Gio Reyna since you will need a quality player in the US market. Matteo has no plans on representing them on a senior level," he responded not at all worried at the man's attempt to get him to pre-emptively negotiate a rushed deal for his client.

Matteo is probably the only player after Rakim he was sure off, but unlike the latter, he was hungrier for glory which is why he decided to hedge his bets on him. After all most of the greatest players in the game came from harsh environments and not from a villa district in Florida. Regardless of where he placed Matteo, he would claw himself to the top just like he had and that's why he had the confidence to hold off a juggernaut like NIKI.

As the buzz around the stadium reached a fever pitch, Oliver and Simon stepped away from their secluded spot in the VIP lounge. Below them, the two teams were already warming up under the floodlights, black-and-white kits on one side and the stars and stripes on the other. Even from their

vantage point, they could feel the electrifying atmosphere: echoes of chanting fans, camera flashes painting the grass in momentary bursts of white, and the anticipation for what promised to be a tense confrontation.

The stadium was surprisingly filled but what was a rare sight in international football the majority of the fans were American. Thus, it came as no surprise as the stadium resounded with the signing of their people's anthem. "Sweet Caroline.... duh duh duh," their loud singing could be heard even outside the stadium as most of the intoxicated fans sang to their heart's content.

Oliver glanced over the field and saw Matteo running through drills with the USA squad. Despite the patriotic crest on his jersey, there was no mistaking the burning desire in his eyes. The teenager had come far, from the scrappy pitch in London where Oliver first spotted him to this very moment on a stage that could vault him into one of the hottest prospects by stepping on the neck of the current biggest talent Rakim Rex.

Speaking of which said phenom could be seen wearing his Titan hood as stood on the sidelines juggling the ball between both his feet. If one looked closer one would notice that his bootlaces were not tied leaving his boots quite loose making his feet all the more impressive. Due to the fact, he had almost no control of his boot most player's touch would be off causing them to mess up easily, but he looked as calm as ever as he surveyed the field not even looking at his feet.

"Rakim stop showing off and get over they want us in this passing drill," Wirtz exclaimed from the middle of the field gaining his attention as he swung his left foot booting the ball high into the air. Nearby spectators immediately stopped shouting as they watched what he was about to do.

They didn't have to wait for long as what goes up must also come down and Rakim had barely jogged for ten yards as he stretched out his right foot. Breaking the ball's descent by dipping his foot the moment it came in contact with his boot it calmly settled onto his foot as he paused for a second before drilling forward like nothing happened. The fans who had seen this though weren't as calm as they immediately exclaimed in amazement causing quite the ruckus.

"I'm not even going to bother asking if you're excited,"

Chapter 438 438 Sweet Caroline

[10/11/2019, Stadion GOSiR, 17:30]

The moment had arrived. Both teams had finished their pre-match warm-ups and were now making their way into the tunnel. The energy around the stadium was electric, the echoes of "Sweet Caroline" still resonating in the background as the American fans made their presence felt.

The German squad, dressed in their crisp ADiD@s tracksuits away kits walked with the confidence of a team that had been thoroughly preparing for the big games. The preparations for the match had been just as methodical as any other in this tournament with tactical sessions that included scouting reports and video analysis. Now all they needed to do was to implement what they had discussed and show why they deserved to represent the Golden eagle of Europe.

Their boots clacked against the tunnel floor; their expressions now locked in focus. Leading them was Luca Unbehaun, who was deep in discussion with his goalie coach as the elder man continued to give him advice. He was the type to over-prepare as he presented his players with all the details they could possibly need. If not for how accurate he was and the fact his information was accurate Luca would have complained that the old man was talking his ears off.

Entering the locker room everyone quietened as they took their designated seats and changed into the already prepared game kits. USA was chosen as the home team in this match forcing the German contingent to wear their green away kits. Coach Baum stood at the centre of the locker room, waiting for every player to settle before he spoke.

His arms were crossed, his gaze sweeping over his team as he debated whether he had missed something in their preparation. The sound of boots being laced and shin guards being adjusted was the only noise in the room as each player focused on their final preparations. In the end, he could not think of anything and chose to trust his abilities along with that of his team.

"Alright, listen up," Baum's voice finally cut through the silence. "We've covered what to do during tactical meetings and training so I will trust you know what we expect from you. Now all I can ask of you is to Execute! Execute! Execute! That simple word is what differentiates great players from average ones, it's what stands between us and the semi-finals. So Be Greate,"

A sense of anticipation instantly filled the room as their competitive spirit rose to a new level. He had sounded the battle cry, and they were all ready to respond to his call ready to feast on the hopes and dreams of their opponents. Smiling at their eager expression he immediately stepped up to the whiteboard and announced the starting lineup.

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[17:50]

"Welcome ladies and gentlemen for what is promising to be a compelling quarterfinal clash between team USA and Germany in this U-20 competition," Paul Gartner's voice which had now become synonymous with the competition resounded through the stadium speakers and the live stream. "I'm your trusty host Paul Gartner and with me today is Jamie Oliver to offer a different perspective."

"As always, Paul, it's a pleasure to be here, especially for a match as talked about as this one," Jamie Oliver responded, his American accent standing in contrast to Paul's refined European tone. "We've got a blockbuster clash on our hands, and I don't think there's a football fan out there who isn't the slightest bit curious about this clash."

"Indeed, this has been a match wished for by the fans since even before the competition and as luck would have it become a reality," Paul responded in a light-hearted tone. "You have been following Team USA since the start what can you tell us about them and how do you see this match going?"

Jamie Oliver adjusted his headset as he leaned slightly forward, his enthusiasm evident. "Well, Paul, Team USA has been a joy to watch in this tournament. They've got an exciting mix of raw talent and structured play. Coach Ramos has done an excellent job in drilling defensive discipline into the team, and their midfield trio of Musah, Reyna, and McKennie provides both steel and creativity."

He glanced at his notes before continuing. "Now, let's not forget the man up top—Matteo Smith. This guy is a killer in front of goal. He's strong, intelligent, and has a striker's instinct. Seven goals already in this tournament, and I'd bet my bonus that he's looking to add to that tally tonight."

Paul chuckled, amused by Jamie's confident tone. "A bold statement indeed. But they are coming up against a German side that has been nothing short of dominant so far, their only stumble being a draw against Japan. Let's take a look at their starting XI."

The broadcast screen flashed with the lineups as Paul began breaking down Germany's setup. "Germany is deploying their well-rehearsed 4-2-3-1 formation. Luca Unbehaun starts between the posts, with a back four consisting of Simon Asta, Armel Bella-Kotchap, Kevin Ehlers, and Noah Katterbach. Solid and well-balanced, this defence has been tested against high-calibre opposition already in this tournament."

Jamie nodded. "Yeah, I've got to give them credit there. They handled Haaland and Norway well, despite the physical challenge. But they're going to have a different test today against the speed and combination play of the Americans."



Paul continued, "Moving into midfield, we have Angelo Stiller and Niklas Tauer operating as the double pivot. Both have been key in maintaining Germany's possession game and controlling the tempo. But the real stars of the show are their attacking three Rakim taking his familiar left-wing position despite delivering a masterclass on the right against Norway. Florian Wirtz in the middle, Jamie Leweling taking up the right."

Jamie sighed, shaking his head slightly. "Now, this is where things get spicy, Paul. Rakim going up against his former countrymen is the headline, no doubt about it. We all know the history here. The US fans feel like he turned his back on them, while the German fans have fully embraced him as one of their own. It will be interesting to see how he will handle the pressure of the moment."

Paul agreed. "It's a fascinating topic attached to not only this match but also the tournament. But Germany's focal point up front, Youssoufa Moukoko has returned from an injury he sustained during their clash with Italy and is now looking to make his mark on the match. He's a big-game player who thrives under pressure and oh boy these are the biggest stakes of this young lad's career."

Jamie nodded. "And speaking of big-game players, let's flip over to the USA lineup."

The graphic on the broadcast shifted to display the American formation as Jamie took the lead. "USA is sticking with their tried-and-tested 4-2-3-1 as well. Between the sticks, they've got Benfica's CJ dos Santos, who's been solid throughout the tournament. The backline consists of Sergiño Dest at right back, Mark McKenzie and Chris Richards as the centre-backs, and George Bello on the left."

Paul interjected, "A good mix of youth and experience. Richards and McKenzie have been growing in confidence with each match."

Jamie agreed. "Absolutely. Now, in midfield, the engine room consists of Weston McKennie and Yunus Musah. McKennie is the leader out there, dictating play and providing that steel in midfield. Musah is a workhorse, box-to-box, and has been crucial in transitions."

Paul added, "And ahead of them is Giovanni Reyna, operating in the number 10 role."

Jamie smirked. "Yep, and you can bet he'll be extra fired up for this one. He's got a personal point to prove against Rakim, and let's be real—he's got the quality to do it."

Paul continued, "Flanking him, we have Christian Pulisic on the left and Timothy Weah on the right—two explosive wingers capable of stretching the German defence."

Jamie leaned forward slightly. "And leading the line, Matteo Smith. This guy is the total package. He's got the physicality, the Football IQ, and the finishing ability. He'll be going toe-to-toe with Bella-Kotchap and Ehlers all game long."

Paul exhaled deeply. "All the individual battles are set, and both teams are now making their way onto the pitch. The stadium is absolutely rocking, and I have a feeling we're in for something special tonight."

The camera zoomed in on Luca and McKennie who lead their respective teams out onto the field, followed by cheer of support for their respective fans. However, the cheers quickly turned into a defining boo from the American fans the moment Rakim at the back of the line stepped out of the tunnel. The camera quickly focused on him as the scene unfolded his image appearing on the large screen enticing the fans to boo even more.

[Ding: Mamba Mentality 'Grade Unique, Trait hidden function triggered]

[10/11/2019, Stadion GOSiR, 17:50]

The deafening chorus of boos raining down on Rakim didn't seem to faze him as he simply reassured the kid that was holding his hand. The blonde Polish boy no older than 10 had visibly flinched when the cascade of boos descended on them. "Don't worry kid blonde worry Marcel they are booing for me." He told him with a light smile reaching out a hand to ruffle his neatly styled hair that made him look like he was going to a bar mitzva.

"Huh, why would they be booing you? You're really great," he innocently asked as he started gushing over one of his goals against Italy that had impressed him.

Instead of answering his question rakim asked one of his own as he glanced down looking into Marcel's light blue eyes. "You want to be a pro one day, right?" His question was quickly met with an eager nod, "I want to be like Robert when I grow up and help him win a World Cup,"

He spent the next few moments gushing over his Idol the man who had made Polish football proud. Rakim chuckled at the boy's enthusiasm, nodding as Marcel continued praising Robert Lewandowski with the kind of admiration only a young dreamer could muster. The passion in his voice was undeniable, and Rakim didn't bother interrupting him as they walked onto the pitch.

"If you want to achieve your goal then you have to be nothing but great, simply playing the game and becoming a professional isn't enough," Rakim told him with a serious tone locking gazes with the boy who had now calmed down. "If they don't boo your that means they don't fear your abilities and if they don't fear you, you're simply not great,"

Marcel's eyes widened slightly at Rakim's words, his young mind trying to process the deeper meaning. The roar of the crowd, the bright lights of the stadium, the pressure of the moment—none of it seemed to shake the German winger in the slightest. In fact, he seemed to look forward to it, something he couldn't fathom as he felt the urge to cry whenever one of his caches critiqued him.

Before Marcel could respond, the referee signalled for the children to take a step forward as the players stood for the national anthems. He felt the urge to look back, but the loud singing of the American national anthem resounded from the stands kept him rooted. While Rakim might not fear them he had seen plenty of news on how crazy these guys can be and didn't want to agitate them further.

Following the American anthem came the German one which seemed to go by much quicker for little Marcel. Rakim gave the boy one last pat on the head before jogging toward his position in the German lineup. The little guy looked back one more time before joining his friends in taking their seats in the row of seats prepared behind the away team's bench.

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[Rakim POV]

[Ding: Mamba Mentality 'Grade Unique, Trait hidden function triggered]

Ding: Mamba Mentality 'Garde Unique.' Trait

-Best Training Results by 15% When consistently pushing your limits in training

-Has a 30% boost when translating practised skills into a live game, resulting in fewer errors in crucial moments.

-Boost a random stat by 1 grade for 10 minutes when Ego is challenged

-(Limited time function), 15% increase in endurance, 10% decrease in team vision when attacking, 20% increase in Speed, Football Technique, and Stamina for the duration of the match or until your opponent's will is broken,

(Note: The Mamba system thrives under pressure playing in hostile crowds primarily targeting you on both professional and personal levels will trigger random functions.)

'Well, I guess even the system wants to go all out,' Rakim thought to himself as he took his spot next to the halfway line on the left flank. A dangerous smile appeared on his face as he heard someone shout profanities at him from the nearby stands.

{You nervous? I know it can't be easy playing in this match,} Eva asked in his mind causing him to stop his thoughts for a second as he gazed at Luca and Christian Pulisic performing the coin toss.

'You know for just a second I hoped... I even felt bad having to face them despite talking a big game leading up to the match. Don't know why I thought they might cheer for me, But I guess them booing makes what I have to do a lot easier.' Rakim responded as he did his best to block out the noise knowing that reacting to them would only hurt him.

{Fair enough, is there anything you want to ask before your match?} She asked him expecting him to question regarding the sudden action of the Mamba mentality traits.

'No not really, it's pretty self-explanatory, though the boost in endurance has me wondering if the system is expecting me to get fouled a lot?' He responded contemplating whether it was predicting what was about to happen in the match or if this was simply part of the trait.

{Actually, it is a bit of both, the likelihood of you being treated more roughly in this match with emotions running high coupled with the drama and the history is high. However, the main reason is due to whom this trait is modelled after, a player so good and pressured in his skills that he would take on the whole team if they managed to wake the monster. This coupled with your playstyle might push defenders to opt to just foul you instead of taking the risk of getting humiliated.}

'So, what you're telling me is, expect to get kicked a lot?' Rakim smirked to himself, stretching his neck from side to side as the final preparations were being made on the field.

{Essentially, that is unless you guys let them steamroll you} Eva commented with a light-hearted tone sounding almost disinterested in how he would handle this challenge. 'That was never an option was it,' Rakim immediately commented just as the two captains and the officials finished their little talk ending in a USA Kick off.

Luca chose to stay on the away side keeping their fans behind them since they were already outnumbered, they might as well shoot into their goal first. Rakim watched the German keeper jog back to his position adjusting his kit as he looked down the wing at Dest whom he would have to face today.

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[10/11/2019, Stadion GOSiR, 18:00]

\*FWEEET\*

The shrill sound of the referee's whistle pierced through the deafening noise of the stadium. The match had officially begun. Matteo Smith tapped the ball back to McKennie, who immediately scanned the field before shifting the ball sideways to Yunus Musah. Team USA wasted no time, quickly pushing their lines forward, looking to control the opening minutes with a high tempo.

"And we are underway here in Stadion GOSiR!" Paul Gartner announced, his voice brimming with excitement. "Team USA in white, immediately settling into possession, looking to keep control of the ball early on."

Jamie Oliver leaned forward, watching the ball zip between the American midfielders. "No surprises there, Paul. They know Germany likes to dominate possession, so they're trying to set the tone first. They must not let Germany dictate this match early."

Reyna, positioned just behind Matteo, received the ball in a pocket of space between Stiller and Tauer. With a smooth turn, he instantly played it out wide to Pulisic, who had already begun his sprint down his

left flank. Jamie Leweling tracked back, already in anticipation of an early aggressive attack from their opponents.

Pulisic, with a burst of acceleration, took a sharp touch inside, bypassing Asta before threading a pass to Matteo, who had dropped just outside the box. Bella-Kotchap moved in fast, stepping up to close the space, but Matteo shifted the ball quickly onto his stronger right foot. With a split-second opening, he let loose a powerful strike aimed at the bottom corner. The crowd held its breath as the ball skidded off the wet grass, rocketing towards the goal.

Chapter 440 Slip of the Tongue

Pulisic, with a burst of acceleration, took a sharp touch inside, bypassing Asta before threading a pass to Matteo, who had dropped just outside the box. Bella-Kotchap moved in fast, stepping up to close the space, but Matteo shifted the ball quickly onto his stronger right foot. With a split-second opening, he let loose a powerful strike aimed at the bottom corner. The crowd held its breath as the ball skidded off the wet grass, rocketing towards the goal.

The ball skimmed just inches above the grass, heading straight toward the bottom corner of Luca Unbehaun's goal. The German goalkeeper reacted in a flash, diving low and stretching out a strong right hand.

"Oh, it's a rocket from Matteo Smith!" Paul Gartner exclaimed, his voice cracking with excitement. "He's not waiting around—testing Unbehaun from the get-go!"

"Luca's reflexes are on full display here," Jamie Oliver added. "If you ask me, that early strike could've easily nestled into the net if he wasn't fully alert. Great read by the German keeper."

Unbehaun's fingertips managed to parry the ball out for an early corner, electrifying the American fans behind that goal. Pulisic jogged over to the corner flag, quickly placing the ball as the big men—McKenzie and Richards—took up position in the box.



The resulting corner came in fast and low, but Bella-Kotchop, reading the flight perfectly, rose high at the near post to head it clear. It fell at the feet of Jamie Leweling, who wasted no time, looking to spring the quick counter. With a swift pass to Florian Wirtz—who, in turn, flicked a clever first-time ball toward Rakim on the left flank—Germany came bursting forward to the overwhelming roar of disapproval from the USA fans who were in the majority.

The jeers and boos seemed to intensify the moment Rakim touched the ball as the fans did their best to rattle him. He did not care though and simply raised his head as his long legs pushed the ball forward tearing up the turf. In no time he had reached full speed and was tearing up the left flank with surgical precision as he crossed the halfway line.

Sensing the open space ahead, Rakim pushed the ball forward once more, his feet dancing over it as a he mixed blend of step-overs and feints. Sergiño Dest sprinted across from the American back line to engage, determined to keep him from slicing any deeper into U.S. territory. Rakim's eyes flicked over Dest's approach, a quick shift of weight to the left forced Dest to plant his feet. Then, with lightning speed, Rakim flicked the ball back to the right, following it up with a sudden step-over that sent a ripple of excitement through the German crowd—along with another wave of loud boos from the American majority.

Despite the hostility, the winger pushed forward, forcing Dest into a desperate slide to block his path. "Dest is giving it everything right now," Paul Gartner remarked, his voice echoing across the stadium. "He can't afford to give Rakim so much as an inch."

However, it wasn't enough as Rakim managed to tiptoe around Dest's challenge at the last second, barely keeping the ball in play as it skidded along the sideline. More boos erupted, but he charged ahead anyway. He powered toward the edge of the box, where Chris Richards who had tracked back from the corner stepped up and quickly closed down the angle.

Forced to come to a sudden stop as he saw no viable option through without being fouled and the lack of runs being made into the box he decided to calm things down. Performing a few stepovers mixed with the occasional flip-flap as he feinted a breakthrough he kept the defender at bay. This gave Team USA a chance to regroup and the German contingent a chance to orderly push up the field.

Just as it looked like the scene would settle down Rakim suddenly dragged the ball back with his right foot before nudging it up the flank with his left foot. It was just in time to dodge a risky slide tackle from Dest who came sliding in a second later. That wasn't the end as Rakim performed a reverse elastico liking the ball up as he skipped forward.

His two shoulders collided with Richards on one side who had reacted to Dest's sudden charge and Weston McKennie USA's defensive midfielder. He wasn't bodied to the ground like most home team spectators had expected but instead, it was the two American players who were sent stumbling back as he used his arms to fight through the obstacle. Slipping past them he nudged the ball past another player as deafening boos descended once again but he didn't care as he drew his leg back for a shot.

Ignoring the pull on his left arm that was yanking him to the ground Rakim swiped his foot along the ball and sent a curling shot towards goal before crashing to the ground. A sharp hush fell over the crowd as the ball spun off Rakim's foot, slicing through the air with a deadly curl. For a moment, time seemed to slow. CJ dos Santos, the USA goalkeeper, lunged to his right, arms outstretched in a desperate attempt to save. The stadium lights gleamed off the ball, tracing its path toward the top corner of the net.

Paul Gartner's voice soared above the din. "What a strike! That shot has dos Santos beaten if it drops in time!"

Beside him, Jamie Oliver practically jumped from his seat. "No way we're letting that go in! C'mon CJ, get to it!" a moment of silence so loud one's heartbeat could be heard lingered. "I mean CJ is made for the big moments," he quickly corrected as the ball curled towards the near corner.

With a last-second twist, the ball smacked against the outside of the post and ricocheted away—harmlessly bouncing out for a goal kick. The American fans erupted in relieved cheers, while a few scattered German supporters groaned at the near miss. Rakim lay on the ground for a split second, glaring at the official as if to ask for a foul, but no whistle came followed by a crescendo of claps from the home supporters over the decision.

"Lucky break for the US there," Jamie Oliver said, exhaling hard. "They've got to tighten up in defence. That was way too close for comfort."

Rakim slowly stood up, rolling his shoulder to ease the sting where he'd been pulled back. The shower of boos returned, but he barely acknowledged it, only flicking an irritated glance at the referee before jogging back into position.

CJ dos Santos wasted no time placing the ball for the goal kick, eager to keep Germany on the back foot. He launched a booming pass deep into midfield. McKennie rose high to beat Tauer in the air, heading the ball toward Pulisic's feet. Pulisic cushioned it expertly, then instantly played it forward to Giovanni Reyna, who was drifting between the German midfield and back line.

"Oh, just look at that link-up from the American wunderkinds," Jamie Oliver chimed in, excitement painting his words. "Pulisic and Reyna—what a dynamic combo for the Stars and Stripes!"

Reyna darted forward with quick, precise touches, trying to find room. Armel Bella-Kotchap rushed out to close him down, but Reyna dished the ball wide to Timothy Weah before the big centre-back could make contact. Weah turned on the jets, blazing down the right flank. Noah Katterbach scrambled to keep up, but Weah's pace gave him a tiny window to cross from near the corner flag.

It was a sizzling, low cross, and Matteo Smith broke free from his marker at the near post. He lunged to connect first-time with his right foot, only for Kevin Ehlers to sweep across with a perfectly timed slide tackle, sending the ball spinning out of the box and into open space.

"Wow, Ehlers with the crucial intervention!" Paul exclaimed, nearly shouting into his mic. "Smith was poised to pull the trigger there." The loose ball rolled toward the edge of the box where Angelo Stiller comfortably collected it as he deftly turned avoiding a tackle from Giovanni.