

Football 451

Chapter 451 451 A Pinch Of Luck

[105]

The ball curled beautifully over the American wall, dipping sharply as it spun toward the far top corner. The entire stadium collectively drew its breath—this felt like the moment. CJ dos Santos took one decisive step, launching himself spectacularly to his left, stretching every muscle in his body. His fingertips were agonisingly close to reaching the ball, but it was for nought as he simply couldn't reach it.

However, Lady Luck smiled upon him as the ball couldn't drop enough to slip under the bar as it crashed against the crossbar in the next second. A collective gasp echoed around the stadium as the ball flew into the stands. "It's off the crossbar! So close from Rakim!" Paul Gartner exclaimed breathlessly; disbelief evident in his voice.

Rakim stood frozen for a brief moment, his eyes locked onto the crossbar where his shot had struck, still vibrating slightly from the powerful impact. In the end, he could only shake his head in disbelief as he jogged back into position, offering an apologetic nod toward Moukoko who had been an option. The didn't have to go far though as the referee blew his whistle ending the first half of extra time not bothering to let them play extra time.

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After a brief moment of recovery, the teams switched sides quickly, mindful of their exhaustion but fully aware of what was at stake. The referee sharply blew the whistle to restart play, and Germany immediately set about creating chances again.

Germany started off strong pressed first, with Angelo Stiller threading a pinpoint pass to Wirtz just outside the American box. Florian elegantly slipped past Musah's challenge and laid off a quick one-two pass with Rakim. Wirtz received the return pass perfectly, firing a shot low towards the bottom corner—but CJ dos Santos dived decisively, parrying it expertly around the post.

Germany swung in the resulting corner, Rakim curling a precise ball toward the near post. Bella-Kotchap surged forward powerfully, meeting it with a thumping header that rocketed toward goal. But just as the German bench started to rise in anticipation, Weston McKennie heroically hurled himself forward, clearing it off the line with an instinctive header. The ball fell sharply to Youssoufa Moukoko, who tried a quick volley—but this time it was Mark McKenzie's turn to block bravely, throwing his body in front of the strike and deflecting it behind once more.

"Incredible defending by the Americans," Jamie Oliver shouted excitedly. "First McKennie, then McKenzie—they're putting everything on the line!"

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USA surged forward moments later, refusing to sit back. Sergiño Dest picked up possession just behind midfield and immediately drove forward, skipping effortlessly past Kevin Schade's challenge. Joshua Vagnoman tried to match him stride for stride, but Dest cleverly played a quick one-two with Timothy Weah, whose flick was perfectly weighted into Dest's path.

Bursting clear down the wing, Dest swung an inviting cross toward the penalty area, aiming for Matteo Smith who had peeled away from Lars Lukas Mai. Smith rose powerfully, connecting firmly and directing his header downward. Luca Unbehaun, however, reacted superbly, diving low and somehow clawing the ball away from the bottom corner with one strong hand. The rebound fell straight back to Smith, but just as he went to strike again, Bella-Kotchap lunged forward decisively, stretching his leg fully to block the follow-up shot and scramble it clear.

"What astonishing drama at both ends!" Paul Gartner exclaimed, almost out of breath. "Germany refusing to concede; USA continuing to press forward!"

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Germany, sensing urgency, quickly turned defence into attack once more. Angelo Stiller collected Bella-Kotchap's clearance and instantly picked out Rakim with a swift diagonal ball into midfield. Rakim turned gracefully with a flick of his foot as he skipped past his marker, his eyes lighting up as he spotted Moukoko darting forward.

With remarkable vision, Rakim unleashed a beautifully weighted through-ball that split Richards and McKenzie perfectly. Moukoko timed his run to perfection, breaking into the box completely clear. CJ dos Santos stormed off his line to narrow the angle rapidly. Moukoko steadied himself and fired low to the goalkeeper's right—but dos Santos stretched brilliantly, sticking out his foot to deflect the ball wide with an extraordinary reflex save.

"Unbelievable from CJ dos Santos yet again!" Jamie Oliver shouted; his voice filled with admiration. "He simply refuses to let Germany through!"

"Indeed, Bothe keepers seemed to have made a pact to keep us entertained to the very need vowing to not let a single ball past them." Paul Gartner intoned as he watched the German striker's disbelieving expression as he looked at the American keeper getting up from the ground. "It seems they are determined to take this game into a penalty shootout, before that let's see what the Germans can do with this corner."

In a matter of moments, Wirtz stood over the ball at the right corner flag. He raised a hand before closing in on the ball at pace his foot connecting with the ball in the next second. The ball soared

gracefully, arcing dangerously toward the far post. Bella-Kotchap once again surged forward, locked in a fierce aerial battle with Chris Richards, each fighting to position themselves under the rapidly descending cross. Richards managed to get the first touch, flicking it clear—but only as far as Rakim, lurking just outside the penalty area.

With a sublime first touch, Rakim cushioned the ball perfectly onto his left foot, instantly cutting inside to evade a lunging tackle from Yunus Musah. Without hesitation, he unleashed a ferocious strike toward goal. The ball sliced powerfully through a sea of bodies, taking a slight deflection off McKenzie's outstretched leg. CJ dos Santos, wrong-footed for a fraction of a second, instinctively shifted his weight, reaching desperately to his right.

However, it was too late and the next moment the silent stadium erupted in a thunderous crescendo as German fans jumped in jubilation. The ball lay nestled in the goal as Rakim followed by his teammates sprinted towards the corner with his arms raised wide. Pandemonium broke out among the German fans. Rakim slid to his knees at the corner flag, fists clenched in pure elation as his teammates swarmed him, leaping into a pile of ecstatic celebration. Even Coach Baum leapt off the bench, arms pumping furiously into the air.

"A GOAL AT LAST! Rakim Rex has finally broken through, and Germany has taken the lead with barely minutes remaining!" Jamie Oliver's voice trembled with excitement. "What a moment of brilliance, with just the right pinch of luck to take the lead."

"That pinch of luck was definitely there, but it doesn't matter as a goal is a goal in the end." Gartner intoned with a bright smile as he watched the replay of the goal shown on the screen. "CJ dos Santos did everything he could, but even he couldn't keep that one out, and after an endless barrage of attempts, Germany has finally been rewarded." The scoreboard now read: Germany 3 – 2 USA.

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The Americans were rattled by the sudden goal, but desperation gave way to results as they started playing some of the best football, they had all game and tournament. Weston McKennie bulldozed forward from the centre circle, shrugging off a clumsy challenge from Wirtz. His powerful strides carried him toward the German box, but Bella-Kotchap cut him off with a perfectly timed sliding tackle, sending the ball spinning out of play.

Sergiño Dest took the quick throw-in, finding Giovanni Reyna, who instantly danced around Kevin Schade with a cheeky nutmeg. Reyna surged forward, the crowd roaring as he approached the box. He drilled a low cross into the area, aiming for Matteo Smith. But Lars Lukas Mai read the delivery well, throwing himself in the path of the ball to make a crucial interception. The German defender immediately launched a counterattack with a looping clearance to Rakim on the left flank.

Rakim expertly brought the ball down with a subtle touch and burst forward, his powerful strides eating up the turf. Dest backpedalled, eyes wide and cautious. Rakim toyed with him, rolling the ball between his feet before executing a dizzying series of stepovers. Dest lunged forward, but Rakim pulled off a breathtaking double touch, slipping past him and bolting down the wing. With Moukoko sprinting to the near post, Rakim delivered a wicked, curling cross aimed at his teammate's run.

CJ dos Santos once again rose to the occasion, wanting to make up for his earlier mistake leaping high to punch the ball clear just before it could reach Moukoko's forehead. The clearance, however, was poor, landing only just outside the box. Wirtz pounced on the loose ball, blasting a thunderous shot back towards goal.

Chapter 452 452 Venomous Heel

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The ball shot toward the goal like a bullet, but Mark McKenzie had anticipated the attempt. He hurled himself fearlessly into the line of fire, his chest absorbing the ferocious strike before collapsing to the ground. The ball ricocheted away toward the right flank, where Timothy Weah immediately scooped it up and started surging forward.

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The Americans roared to life, understanding that these were the final moments, and they had nothing left to lose. Weah tore down the flank, his blistering pace leaving Katterbach trailing behind. He executed a deft feint to the outside before cutting inside, dodging an attempted tackle from Angelo Stiller.

A one-two exchange with Reyna left the German midfield gasping, their defensive shape crumbling under the intense American counterattack. Weah drilled a powerful low cross into the penalty area, seeking out Matteo Smith, who was charging toward the near post.

Lars Lukas Mai threw himself across the path of the ball, his outstretched leg deflecting the cross upward, causing it to spin awkwardly through the air. Luca Unbehaun rose high, arms stretched wide and managed to punch it clear—just barely.

The ball found its way to Christian Pulisic, who immediately curled a shot toward the far corner from the edge of the box. But Bella-Kotchap, like a man possessed, dove low and blocked the strike with his shoulder, sending it skidding out for a corner. Some American players tried to call for a handball, but the defender had his arms locked onto his body and the referee had clearly seen it hit the top of his shoulder.

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Pulisic hurriedly placed the ball at the corner flag, his expression fierce and determined. His teammates crowded the German box, bodies jostling and pushing for position. As the ball whipped in, Richards soared above everyone, his head making clean contact. But Luca Unbehaun's positioning was immaculate. The German keeper reacted instantly, diving to his right to catch the header with both hands. With a deep, frustrated sigh, he rolled the ball out to Vagnoman who immediately launched a long ball forward.

Germany, sensing an opportunity to kill the game off completely, pushed forward mercilessly. Rakim danced past Musah and McKennie, with a piece of dizzying footwork and nimble manoeuvring. His long strides carried him swiftly into the final third before threading a precise ball through to Kevin Shade, who made an incisive run into the box from the left side.

One-on-one with CJ dos Santos, he tried to curve the ball around the keeper's outstretched arms. But CJ in a show of brilliance, dropped to the ground quickly, deflecting the ball with a strong right hand. The rebound trickled back to Moukoko at the edge of the box who struck it first time toward the open goal. However, Richards came in clutch with an instinctive slide tackle deflecting the ball out of the box. The German bench groaned, their hands on their heads as the American defence stood firm once more.

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The board went up, indicating one minute of additional time as the Germans could see the finish line of this hard-fought game. The American fans screamed themselves hoarse, knowing their last chance was upon them. McKenzie, though utterly exhausted, somehow mustered the strength to launch one final long ball forward.

The pass soared into the German half where Matteo Smith was waiting, tightly marked by Bella-Kotchap and Mai. But Smith rose high above them both, winning the aerial duel with a powerful header that flicked the ball down to Pulisic's feet. Pulisic twisted his way past Asta, his footwork swift as he threaded

a beautiful pass to Reyna just outside the box. Reyna cut inside sharply and attempted a low drive toward the near post, but Luca Unbehaun reacted magnificently, parrying the shot out wide.

The ball spun toward the left wing where Weah beat Vagnoman for the ball not bothering to control it as he sent a one-time cross into the box. Everyone leapt for the ball—defenders, attackers, even Luca Unbehaun who had stormed off his line. But the ball evaded them all as it curved back out but around the edge of the back post, the figure of Matteo Smith appeared running out.

The striker jumped forward into the air right foot which had been kicking forward now whipped back with venom. The back of his heel connected furiously connected with the ball with a soft thud and in the next moment, it pierced the goal. The stadium fell silent as no one dared to breathe, no one dared to believe what they had just witnessed but the soft thud of Simon Asta's knees hitting the ground brought them back to life.

"MATTEO SMITH HAS DONE IT! HE'S DONE THE IMPOSSIBLE!" Jamie Oliver roared, his voice shaking with pure exhilaration. "An outrageous finish! A goal for the ages! The USA has snatched an equalizer in the absolute dying moments of extra time!"

Paul Gartner was speechless, his mouth agape. "What can you even say about that? An impossible strike at the most desperate of moments. Matteo Smith has written his name into this tournament, and I dare say footballing history!"

The American players mobbed Matteo, shouting and embracing him with unrestrained joy. The crowd's deafening cheers mixed with chants of "USA! USA!" as they celebrated the miracle that had just unfolded before their eyes. The scoreboard now read: Germany 3 – 3 USA. With no time left, the referee blew his whistle, signalling the end of extra time. The stadium shook with noise, echoing with the roars of jubilant American fans and the stunned silence of German supporters. The match was not over yet. It was time for penalties.



The match had reached its boiling point, the tension thick enough to cut with a knife. Their fans, a sea of red, white, and blue, erupted in raucous delight. Meanwhile, the German players wore expressions of disbelief and anger, their minds struggling to comprehend how they had allowed such a stunning goal in the final seconds of the match. Players from both sides tried to catch their breath, some collapsing to their knees, others stretching out cramped muscles. The trainers rushed out to provide last-minute massages and water as coaches barked out instructions and words of encouragement.

Rakim stood in silence at the side of the field following the goal and didn't even notice when Coach Baum approached him. "Keep your head son. What's done is done. We've still got penalties to deal with. It's time to put this game to bed,"

Rakim, his chest heaving as he took in deep breaths, nodded fiercely. "You're right let's put this game to bed."

Coach Baum clapped Rakim on the shoulder before turning to call the rest of the team over. Despite all of them being tired they still dutifully jogged over to hear their coaches game plan the '11-meter duel'. "Alright, listen up! We've worked too hard to let this slip away. We go into these penalties with a clear mind. Stay calm, pick your corner stick to it, and put the ball in the back of the net. Let's do this!"

On the other side of the field, Coach Ramos spoke to his players with equal intensity. "You've come this far, and no one thought you'd even make it here. Everything you've done has led to this moment. Believe in yourselves and make history."

The crowd's volume barely diminished even as the minutes ticked away. Anticipation mounted, nerves tingling as the referee and captains from both sides gathered for the coin toss to determine who would shoot first. The referee flipped the coin high into the air, all eyes locked on the small piece of metal. It hit the ground, bounced once, and settled. Germany won the toss and elected to go Second.

Jamie Oliver's voice filled the air. "And here we go, folks. It's all down to the nerve-racking lottery of penalties. Who will hold their composure and rise to the occasion?"

Paul Gartner added gravely, "We've seen tremendous bravery, skill, and resilience from both teams. But now, it's all about who can keep their nerve. The psychological battle begins now."

The players lined up at the halfway line, arms draped over each other's shoulders as their teammates prepared to step up for the shootout. The tension was palpable, the air thick with expectation. Everything that had transpired over the previous 120 minutes came down to this.

Chapter 453 The Biggest Cahonas

The tension inside the stadium was unlike anything anyone had ever experienced. The chants, the jeers, the roars—it was a cacophony of emotions from every corner of the ground. Coaches nervously paced on the sidelines, their lips mouthing silent prayers. Cameras zoomed in on faces drenched in sweat and eyes filled with nervous determination.

Jamie Oliver's voice crackled over the commentary. "Well, folks, this is it. A pulsating, exhausting, and breathtaking match has come down to a penalty shootout Duel. USA versus Germany. Everything on the line."

Paul Gartner chimed in, his tone grave yet electrifying. "Two teams, one dream. And only one of them will advance. What a match this has been. But now, it all comes down to a bit of luck and whoever has the biggest Cahonas."

The two teams stood side-by-side, arms interlocked, each set of eyes focused solely on the goal ahead. The referees confirmed with both goalkeepers, Luca Unbehaun for Germany and CJ dos Santos for the USA, before making their way to the goal line. Pulisic USA's captain chose to shoot into the side where the majority of American fans were to add more pressure to their opponents.

The whistle blew, signalling for USA's first kick taker, Timothy Weah, to step forward and take his shot. The crowd's roar simmered into a tense, electric hum as he walked towards the spot. After entering the penalty area, he picked up the ball from the ground and placed it on the penalty spot. The referee gave him the go-ahead, and he took a few steps back from the ball while glancing briefly at the keeper's position.

\*FWEEEEEEE\*

The referee's whistle sounded the next moment. Weah immediately acted with haste and made an angled run towards the ball taking a jump-step before smacking the ball and sending it towards the goal. His technique was immaculate as he sent Luca diving the wrong way as the ball homed into the top right corner.

A bright smile lit up his face as he pumped his fist in joy. "Brilliantly taken by Timothy Weah!" Jamie Oliver shouted; his voice filled with enthusiasm. "Absolutely no nerves on display. He's just given the USA the perfect start to this shootout."

"Composed, precise, and full of confidence. That's exactly how you want to open up a penalty shootout." Paul Gartner agreed. "The Germans have to respond now." The scoreboard updated: USA 1 - 0 Germany,

Germany's first taker, Youssoufa Moukoko, stepped forward. His gaze was calm, his expression unreadable. As he placed the ball on the spot, he glanced up briefly at CJ dos Santos before turning his focus back to the ball.

\*FWEEEEEEE\*

He took a casual yet powerful run-up, his body leaning to the left before whipping the ball low to the right. CJ dos Santos guessed correctly, but the shot was perfectly placed, kissing the inside of the post before nestling in the net.

"Cold as ice from Moukoko!" Paul Gartner exclaimed. "CJ dos Santos was close, but not close enough."

"Absolutely. You could see him trying to read Moukoko's body language, but the execution was just flawless." Jamie Oliver noted. The scoreboard updated: USA 1 - 1 Germany.

Next up was Giovanni Reyna the American playmaker. He Jogged with a light swagger into the box, picked up the ball and repositioned it on the spot. He took three steps back, glanced briefly at Luca Unbehaun, and then nodded at the referee as if telling him to do his job. \*FWEEEEEEEE\* Reyna ran up and drove the ball fiercely toward the top-left corner. Unbehaun dived the right way, but the sheer power of the strike made the save impossible. The scoreboard updated: USA 2 - 1 Germany

Jamie Leweling approached the penalty spot next, his breathing steady despite the weight of the moment. As he prepared to shoot, CJ dos Santos gave him a hard, unblinking stare. \*FWEEEEEEEE\*

Leweling hit it low and hard to the left, but CJ dos Santos anticipated it perfectly, springing low to his right and palming the ball away with both hands. The American fans exploded in rapturous celebration. "Saved! CJ dos Santos has done it again!" Jamie Oliver shouted. "The USA has the advantage now!"

"Incredible reflexes and mental fortitude from CJ. It's advantage USA for sure." Paul Gartner's tone brimmed with excitement. The scoreboard remained unchanged at: USA 2 - 1 Germany.

Now, Matteo Smith stepped forward with a confident swagger as he jogged to the penalty box. "He has scored some incredible goals in this tournament and now his nation needs him to do it again." The American fans chanted his name, hoping for their newfound hero to come through for them.

\*FWEEEEEEEE\*

He sprinted toward the ball and slammed it down the middle with devastating power. Luca Unbehaun had already dived to his left, leaving the ball to crash into the back of the net with emphatic force.

"BOOM! Matteo Smith just unleashed a rocket!" Jamie Oliver roared. "And the pressure on Germany just doubled!"

"The kid has nerves of steel. The Germans are in trouble now." Paul Gartner noted. The scoreboard updated: USA 3 - 1 Germany. Under enormous pressure, Florian Wirtz approached the spot. The crowd's noise was deafening, but the German playmaker tuned it all out.

\*FWEEEEEEEE\*

He took a calm run-up and almost lazily slotted the ball into the bottom-right corner leaving CJ dos Santos rooted to his line. "When you talk about having Cahonas, Wirtz just proved that the pressure doesn't even exist in his vocabulary," Paul Gartner commented with a light smile as he watched Germany's number 10 just saunter away as if nothing had happened. The scoreboard updated: USA 3 - 2 Germany.

Yunus Musah was next for the USA. His expression was calm, though his shoulders tensed slightly as he approached the spot. He took a deep breath, set himself, and stared down Luca Unbehaun.

\*FWEEEEEEEE\* After the referee's whistle sounded, Yunus made an angled run towards the ball and unleashed a heavy shot towards the goal.

Unbehaun was ready though and he read it perfectly, diving to his right and pushing the ball away with a firm right hand. The USA fans felt a cold chill descend upon their being as the German fans celebrated in joy. "Saved! Unbehaun gives Germany a lifeline!" Jamie Oliver shouted. Yunus stood rooted on the spot feeling as if his world was spinning crazily, not believing what had happened.

"And they'll need to take full advantage of it now," Paul Gartner added as the scoreboard remained unchanged. Angelo Stiller was the man tasked with bringing his team back on level terms and he kept his emotions under check.

\*FWEEEEEEE\*

He struck the ball cleanly toward the top-left corner. CJ dos Santos guessed wrong, diving the opposite way. The net rippled as the ball buried itself in the goal. "Stiller delivers! Germany is still very much in this." Paul Gartner acknowledged. "We're all tied up again."

"Absolutely clutch from Stiller." Jamie Oliver replied. The scoreboard updated: USA 3 - 3 Germany as the Germans in attendance once again let their voices be heard. The American captain, Christian Pulisic, now approached the spot facing the brunt of the pressure.

A miss here could end it all giving Rakim the advantage he needs to spend them packing, but he did his best to remain composed. His teammates watched with bated breath, knowing how much was riding on their leader's kick. Adjusting the ball's position on the spot he made sure there wasn't a blade of grass out of place.

Taking a deep breath he calmly took five steps backward his heels touching the edge of the 18-yard box. "It's the moment of truth; will he be their hero or the dragon that is slain' in someone else's heroic tale?" Paul absent-mindedly commented trying his best to fight the nerves. \*FWEEEEEEEE\*

Pulisic made his run up quickly closing in on the ball he had set his decision to place the ball in the bottom left corner. However just as he was about to swing his foot, he watched the keeper's leg twitch in that direction seemingly getting ready to pounce. He knew he should have stuck with his choice but in the heat of the moment, his mind went blank unable to come up with any solutions.

#### Chapter 454 454 Kill Shot

His boot struck the ball with power but without a sense of direction as it blasted forward, swerving wildly, veering high and wide past the right post. The ball sailed over the crossbar, crashing into the advertising boards with a hollow thud. The American fans groaned collectively, their hopes trembling with the realisation of what had just happened.

"He's missed! Christian Pulisic has missed!" Jamie Oliver exclaimed, his voice quivering with shock. "The American captain has faltered at the worst possible moment!"

"What a disaster for the USA. Pulisic had the chance to keep his side in control, but he could not rise to the occasion." Paul Gartner added, his tone thick with tension. "And now the one person they fear has the chance to send them out of the tournament."

The crowd's energy was now frenzied. The German supporters sensed blood, their voices growing louder, chanting Rakim's name as he stepped up to the spot. However, they were quickly drowned out by a wave of jeers and boos from the American fans who were in the majority.

May's expression grew paler and paler as she listened to more of the things the spectators were shouting. She was worried about how some of these shouts would affect Rakim especially with how

nervous he must be having to take the final shot. For some reason, her brain started running scenarios of him slipping mid-run up or worse yet sending the ball to Jesus.

The longer the tension built the more nervous she got not noticing when she started nibbling on her freshly manicured nails. The fact that the referee seemed to be lost on what to do did not help in reassuring her, so she did the unthinkable. She said a prayer, as despite her friends being Christians and regularly going to church her family is what you would call seasonal goers.

On the pitch for a moment, the whole stadium was so loud that Rakim couldn't even think, much less the referee, who forgot to blow his whistle. Taken aback for a moment, Rakim untied the bobble that bounded his dreadlocks, letting them hang freely. He locked eyes with Dos Santos as he went down to adjust the positioning of the ball giving it a light kiss before replacing it on the spot.

As he started taking his steps back the Ground somewhat quietened down, but the avalanche of boos still continued to pelt him. Once his heels reached the edge of the box, he looked to the referee letting him, know he was ready. The latter did the final checks before loudly blowing his whistle.

\*FWEEEEEEE\*

Ignoring the increased intensity of boo sounds took two large side steps to his left his heels clicking each time as they made contact. What followed was a rapid set of footsteps as his boots dug into the ground as he accelerated towards the ball. Now only 3 steps away from the ball he let his left foot drag along the ground in an elaborate stutter-step, his hips feinting to the left just before striking the ball with the inside of his right foot.

He met the ball with a lot of power and effe sending it bending towards the top right corner. Dos Santos managed to react in time guessing the correct direction and leapt after the ball gloves outstretched in



the direction of the ball. The velocity at which the ball travelled was too fast for him even to grasp its shadow, the net rippled in the next moment as the ball buried itself perfectly into the back of the net.

The roar that erupted from the German fans was deafening. It was the sound of pure ecstasy, the eruption of relief and triumph after a nerve-wracking penalty shootout. Rakim with his arms spread wide took off running the moment he scored sprinting towards that one fleck with about 50 German fans surrounded at the side of the stadium surrounded by hostile American fans. Without hesitation, he jumped onto the metal billboard fence with his hands led up high in celebration before quickly being swarmed by the rest of his teammates.

Jamie Oliver's voice almost cracked from the intensity. "He's done it! Rakim Rex has won it for Germany! What a strike! Pure precision, pure power. The Germans are through!"

Paul Gartner couldn't help but laugh with disbelief. "You want your big players to step up at big moments, and Rakim Rex has just delivered. After a monumental match, Germany has prevailed!"

The stadium trembled under the force of the German supporters' celebrations, their chants and cheers echoing across the stunned American fans. Rakim's teammates swarmed him, their arms thrown over his shoulders, their shouts of pure exhilaration drowned by the madness of the crowd. "Finally, it's over," Wirtz exclaimed over the loud exclamation of fans and players who continued to swarm them.

The camera panned to the American players, who stood frozen in disbelief. Their eyes carried a blankness of shock and anguish. Christian Pulisic stared at the ground, his hands locked behind his head as he struggled to come to terms with his miss. Matteo Smith, who had kept their hopes alive with that incredible last-second goal, now stared across the field at the celebrating German team.

His chest heaved with exhaustion, sweat dripping from his brow as he tried to comprehend what had just happened. He had done everything right, yet he still ended up losing over someone else mistake

something he had a hard time wrapping his head around. All around him, his teammates wore similar expressions of despair, their shoulders slumped, eyes searching for comfort in the madness of the moment.

Coach Ramos tried his best to lift the spirits of his shattered squad, but the devastation was evident. They had fought with everything they had, clawed their way back from the brink of elimination, only to have it all taken away by a single, brutal kick. The American fans, so loud and proud moments before, had fallen into a stunned silence. Some tried to rally the team with applause and chants of "USA! USA!", but it sounded hollow and forced. They had watched their players rise, only to see them stumble at the final hurdle.

"Heartbreak for the USA," Jamie Oliver said, his voice shaking with sympathy. "They gave everything, absolutely everything, and to lose in this fashion—it's cruel. But that's the harsh reality of tournament football. The margins between glory and despair are razor thin."

Paul Gartner added softly, "No one can take away what this American side has achieved today. To push a team as talented as Germany to the absolute limit... they can hold their heads high."

On the other side of the field, the Germans had calmed down from their high of victory. Their reserves had given out and they could no longer handle jumping around like monkeys on crack after seeing a banana. Rakim found himself pulled into a bear hug by Bella-Kotchap before the sturdy defender slung an arm around his shoulder. Their joy was unrestrained, the purest form of triumph after a battle that had drained them physically, mentally, and emotionally.

Chapter 455 455 Star

[10/11/2019, Stadion GOSiR, 22:30]

Rakim Rex's eyes squinted against the glaring floodlights, his body still buzzing with adrenaline. His jersey clung to his chest, soaked in sweat, as he guzzled a bottle of water trying to give his starving

muscles the needed nutrients. He would have preferred an electrolyte drink, but beggars can't be choosers and could simply wanted to rest.

However, he had barely reached the side of the side of the pitch when a group of reporters encircled him. They seemed to believe that shoving as many microphones as possible in his sight would entice him to answer them. When in reality the more aggressively they acted prompted his intrusive thoughts to gain the upper hand and entice him to act out his inner Stone Cold.

"Rakim! Rakim! How does it feel to knock out Team USA from the tournament? Your own country!"

"Any words about your decision to play for Germany over the United States?"

"Is it true you have something against American soccer?"

The questions came at him with the force and speed of a machine gun relentless and unforgiving as they looked to make their bylines. His fingers flexed, almost itching to swat the microphones away. But he didn't, He couldn't otherwise he would be waking up to a completely different kind of surprise. Cameras were rolling, eyes trained on him, waiting for him to make a mistake, to fumble under the pressure.

He almost smirked but kept his features neutral. "I play for Germany because they gave me the opportunity. It's not about where you're from; it's about where you're welcomed, where you're valued."

"But you were born in the States, Rakim! Some say it's a betrayal to represent another nation," a voice shouted above the others.

Rakim's gaze locked onto the man's eyes, his voice steady. "Actually, I wasn't I grew up in my parent's house, so when the country closed the door on me representing them. My father's home country offered me a chance to play in this tournament and that is who my loyalty lies with."

Another journalist, a woman with sleek hair and a sharp suit, chimed in, "What about the rumours that you were blackballed from the USA U-17 team?"

Rakim tilted his head in exasperation as he glanced at the reporter who asked the question. "C'mon, bro I'm not gonna do your job for you, this is beyond yesterday's news. Anyone got any new questions before I leave," A beat of silence passed. Then more questions hurled his way, this time with a sharper edge.

"Rakim, is your performance today a message to the USA program?"

"Would you ever consider playing for the United States if they offered you a spot?"

"Do you regret your decision?"

He clenched his jaw, keeping his words measured. "The only thing I regret is not playing my best every time I step on the pitch. As for my performance today? I guess the win says it all." Shrugging his shoulder with a lazy smile he wanted to end the interview there, but another reporter decided to intervene.

"You haven't answered the question yet Rakim," he said with a firm tone not willing to let him leave without getting his sound bite.

"That's Mr Rex to you, what's your question again?" rakim retorted pointing to the blond man wearing a Skie press badge. He was used to journalists from the company not liking him, but he didn't recognise this reporter, they usually kept things subtle or rode the wave.

Some of the other reporters did their best to muffle their laughter finding it funny that a sixteen-year-old boy was telling someone in his thirties to call him by his surname. However, Rakim didn't wind it disrespectful in the slightest as he had learned that the best way to deal with the press is to keep them at arms-length. Why at friendly and familiar with a pack of vultures waiting for the opportunity to tear you to shreds?

"Ahem, Mr Rex my question is would you ever consider playing for the United States if they offered you a spot?" He said not at all flustered from the looks his colleagues had sent him as his gaze remained steely on Rakim.

Rakim folded his arms across his chest, his gaze unwavering. "You're asking the wrong question, Mr Brown," he said, his voice calm but sharp enough to cause the latter's eyebrow to rise in intrigue. "The real question is, why would I consider it in the first place, they are not a strong football country that they have the luxury of saying no to their talents and expect them to return."

"But you could be a star for the U.S.!" the man pressed; his desperation palpable. "Don't you want to represent where you grew up?"

"Let's not get it twisted my friend. I'm already a star and that has never been in question." Rakim retorted, "I simply chose to shine where my talents are appreciated and after what happened today, I'm more certain of my choice than ever of my choice." Following his words he took hold of a strand of his still-red-dyed deadlock as he simply walked through the crowd of reporters moving his arms as if he was moving water out of the way in a pool.

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[12/11/2019, Lublin Airport, 11:45]

The private jet touched down smoothly, its sleek silver exterior gleaming under the morning sun. As it rolled down the runway toward the terminal, the air of luxury clung to it like a second skin. The private jet's engines purred softly as the aircraft taxied to a halt at its dedicated hanger. Moments later, the cabin door swung open, and the passengers descended the stairs, guided by the crisp, chilled air of the Polish morning.

The man who stepped off the jet moved with a casual elegance that came naturally to him. His dark hair was thick, neatly styled, his sharp blue eyes glinting under the sun's ray as he exuded a natural charm. There was a certain ruggedness to his features, the kind you'd find on a man who had worked hard at some point in his life but now wore the polish of wealth like an old, comfortable coat. His tailored navy suit fit him like a glove, exuding the kind of sophistication money could money couldn't buy.

Trailing beside him was a little girl with an unmistakable air of confidence of a little girl who had her daddy wrapped around her little pinkie finger. Trailing just a step behind him was a girl, no more than ten, her golden-brown hair cascading over her shoulders like a waterfall of silk. Her bright, inquisitive eyes seemed to absorb everything around her as she did her best to appear sophisticated.

She could've been a miniature version of Maia Mitchell if one took a closer look just with a sunnier disposition. All her emotions were particularly written on her face as she couldn't wipe the smile away from her face. Her outfit was a blend of stylish and casual—a designer hoodie paired with fitted jeans and a pair of pristine white sneakers.

She bounced on her heels with excitement, her energy almost too much for her tiny frame to contain. Her phone was already clutched in one hand, its case emblazoned with the colours of the German flag and a sticker that read Rex Nation in bold, metallic letters. Yet despite growing up in opulence she is what one would call a certified tomboy, from Samurai swords to playing and watching football.

"Daddy, did you see the clip?" she chirped, her voice clear and vibrant. "He was amazing! Totally destroyed Team USA. Three goals, one of them a penalty, and everyone says he's like, the future of football! I mean, did you see the way he just glided past the defenders? And the way he responded to the reporters was just... so cool. Like he didn't care at all!"

Her father chuckled; his gaze fond as he looked down at her. "I saw it, sweetheart. You've only shown me the highlight reel about twenty times."

"Because it's awesome!" she protested, eyes wide and gleaming. "he's practically a legend in the making, And he's only sixteen! Can you imagine that?"

He smiled at her enthusiasm, his arm gently wrapping around her shoulders. "I can. And I suppose that's why we're here, isn't it?"

Chapter 456 456 A Needed Discussion

[12/11/2019, Location: Upscale Restaurant on the Upper East Side, NY]

Oliver Burke leaned back in his chair, the hum of the upscale restaurant's air conditioning drowning out the muted jazz playing over the speakers. The place was posh—Upper East Side kind of posh. Oliver hated it. He'd have preferred some quiet pub on the west side with working-class men.

Despite being hugely successful he still missed the nights after work where he hit the pubs of London after a days of hard work. once he started taking his role as an agent visiting those places became a rare occasion because bastards like them liked to flaunt their wealth, their power. It was all part of the dance.

After all they spent years being at the bottom of their industry, enduring all types of treatments, so now that they were in a position of power, they can't help but flex it and see what happens. That is why executives in Hollywood feel the need to test the boundary of morality, or Catholic priests feel the need to cuddle with underage boys. Idle and lazy power is the worst kind that exists in this world, as the moment a man gets comfortable in their position, they cease to strive for more and starts testing what they can get away with.

Across the table, Jason Hart swirled his whiskey, eyes gleaming with predatory interest. Beside him, Joe, the chubby executive with enough money to support two families, seven mistresses, and a gambling habit that could bankrupt a small nation, chewed furiously on his steak like he had a personal vendetta against the cow. Greg, the third man at the table, sat stiffly, his gaze never quite meeting Oliver's, shame lurking in his eyes.

He had been tasked with facilitating this deal with Oliver as part of their plan to teach Rakim a lesson and exact some personal revenge. Jason Heart was simply trying to punish a player who had made him look bad in front of the company board. After all, what good is he as the head of scouting when he can't properly assess an asset prospect and manages to fumble them?

An asset that is what Rakim was in his eyes, not just him, but any celebrity/athlete he scouts for the company to work with are all considered assets. They are a means to an end to put food on the table and add a few zeros to his bank account. So, the fact that Rakim managed to bounce back so exponentially following his shooting is a blemish in his stellar record that he can't tolerate.

As for Joe, this was simply about business to him; in his mind, the money Rakim was generating for Apex should have been his. Correspondingly, every time he beats or embarrasses a prominent Niki athlete on the pitch, it hurts the brand, inadvertently hurting his wallet. That is why he jumped at the chance to

play kingmaker with Jason by promoting Matteo using adverts, media campaigns and subtle guidance of talk shows covering the tournament.

This was a means to drive the narrative of that head-to-head propping Matteo while dragging Rakim to the ring. Because even if Rakim didn't respond, if the whole world started to compare the two, added to the juicy history brought about by Oliver and the national team, set up the perfect stage for an epic clash. Hollywood couldn't have written a better script even if Chris Terrio and David S. Goyer were given a second chance at the convoluted and equally confusing clash of man vs alien.

Unlike Lex, who was just starting the pot, Joe was actually backing one of the two horses in the race, but he forgot an important fact. No matter how much effort one puts in to promote a PPV, it is the winner who takes all, and in this case, the fact that Rakim overcame Team USA, he did just that. He did so unapologetically, barely acknowledging the conflict as he went on with business as usual.

"So let me get this straight," Joe snapped, stabbing his knife into the meat. "We pour millions into this kid Matteo, branding him as the next great American striker, and he chokes against Germany? Against that Rakim Rex kid, of all people?"

Oliver's jaw clenched, but his smile remained cool. "Matteo scored 4 goals against Germany, the team you decided to back losing is on you, my guy did his thing. Two of those were absolute stunners—an overhead kick that made international headlines and an acrobatic aerial heel flick straight out of an anime. Not to mention a goal tally of 11 in the tournament, just one below that Haland kid."

"Yeah, and for what?" Joe barked, slamming his fork down with enough force to clatter against the plate. "To make the highlight reels while his team loses? Do you know how much we spent on promoting him? On making him the American golden boy? And he gets punked by that brat who thinks he's untouchable?"

"Face it, Oliver." Jason leaned in, voice smooth and vicious. "Your kid was meant to make a statement, and he did. Just not the one we wanted. Rakim stole the show. Again."

Oliver's eyes narrowed. "And that's your problem. You spent more time trying to engineer a narrative with a set return in an even more volatile game. Now we had an agreement, I fulfilled my end of the bargain it's time to make good on yours."

"That's all well and good, Oliver," Greg muttered, his eyes lowered to the table like he was trying to disappear. "But Rakim's the one everyone remembers. And you know what's worse? Every single one of those moments you're so proud of came because your boy was trying to one-up him. That's not making a star we at NIKI want to create."

"Haha, this is the funniest thing I've heard in my life," Oliver burst out laughing upon hearing that man's words not bothering to hold back in the slightest. "The acrobatic goal against Mexico? That overhead kick against France? People haven't forgotten, and more importantly, brands and teams won't forget. You built the wrong narrative, that's on you. But Matteo's name is buzzing now. You don't get to pin your incompetence on him."

Jason's lips curled into a cold smile. "That's cute, Oliver. Real cute. But NIKI doesn't pay for potential. We pay for results. And the results say Rakim made Matteo look like an amateur. You should be grateful we're even considering keeping Matteo on board."

Oliver slammed his hand on the table, making the glasses rattle. "You think you can just cut him loose because of one game? News flash—thanks to your obsession with Rakim, my Matteo is now a brand. A young icon. Top three hottest strikers under 20 in the world. You can either capitalize on that or look like idiots when he gets snapped up by Adedas."

The mention of Adedas made Joe visibly twitch, and Jason's smile finally faltered. Greg looked like he wanted to sink into his chair. Oliver continued, pressing his advantage. "That's right. Other brands have been sniffing around, and they see what Matteo can become. You cut him loose, and they'll pick up the pieces. You'll look like the morons who not only lost one young phenom but two in the span of 2 years."

Silence settled over the table; the tension so thick it was suffocating. Jason glanced at Joe, who gave a curt nod before replying. "We're not making a decision yet. We'll see how things pan out after the tournament. But don't expect a final payment until we get some results. Prove Matteo's worth the risk."

Oliver sneered, grabbing his coat and throwing it over his shoulder. "Keep your money. Matteo's worth more than these peanuts, his contract with you runs at the need of the year. If you want to extend this corporation, you're going to need to dig deep because anything other than wow won't cut it." He left without another word, his footsteps heavy and deliberate as he pushed through the restaurant doors. Inside, the three men exchanged uneasy glances, each realizing that Oliver might just be right.

Chapter 457 457 F Them Kids

[12/11/2019, Location: Gdynia, Poland]

Matteo sat at the dimly lit corner table of the restaurant; his face set in a scowl as he stabbed at his pasta. The team was scattered across the upscale dining room, celebrating their last night together before everyone went their separate ways. Yunus Musah and Giovanni Reyna slid into the seats across from him, exchanging looks.

Yunus was the first to break the silence. "You good, Mat?"

Matteo shrugged, his fork slicing through his meal with frustrated precision. "I'm here, ain't I?"

"But your mind isn't," Giovanni replied, eyeing him closely. "You've been like this since the Germany game."

"We all have," Matteo shot back. "I came here to win Gio. Instead, we lost just like the pundits had predicted; this all was a waste of time if you ask me." His words were sharp, tinged with bitterness as he took a bite of his pasta.

"Rakim's good," Yunus admitted, leaning back in his chair. "But you're good too. Better, even, when you're focused and in the box."

"Yh, you right, and I believe I can do much more, but with a better system around me," he replied with a much more focused gaze as he looked into Gio's questioning eyes. "I never signed up to carry the burdens of a nation that doesn't even truly understand our game."

"What's that supposed to mean? Don't tell me you actually think of switching, too?" Yunus bit back, clearly enraged and hurt by even the notion.

Matteo held his gaze for a second, reading his clearly hurt and rage-filled body language that reminded him of so many desperate people he had encountered in the slums of London. These people still had something to live or fight for but had spiralled so far out of control due to an action or choice that set them on a bad course and now drowned in despair. That same look of despair was visible in Yunus's gaze as he looked for a lifeline that would support his dream of bringing an international trophy to the country he was born in.

"Honestly, I don't know why you aren't trying out for England or Ghana, they are both better prospects than this. At least there your effort will matter to people who genuinely bleed the game in their lives and show up for more than just bragging rights." Matteo responded in a sombre tone, still holding

Yunus's gaze. "If I'm being honest, whether I will accept the call-up from the national team will depend on their long-term plans to support the team."

Yunus's face went uncharacteristically stiff. He set his fork down gently beside his plate. "You're really going to pin it on support?" he asked, voice quiet. "Everyone can talk big about wanting better resources, better conditions. But we're out here busting our tails for a dream. Not just for ourselves—some kids look up to us. How do you think they'll feel if the person they idolize jumps ship?"

"The will realises the world is tough, ain't that one of your country's philosophies on life?" Matteo said, still staring at Yunus. "In England, or Spain, or Italy, there's a culture around football that's lived and breathed from day one. The Brazilian samba, the Netherlands' total football and even a small country like Portugal have their own unique football culture that makes the players proud to represent the country on any team."

Giovanni interjected, leaning forward with his elbows on the table, voice hushed yet intense. "Is that your only reason, though? Because let me tell you, any American dreams of representing the country on any stage just to hear that crowd chant USA. Just hearing that makes us feel invincible, so we might not have samba, but we have national pride."

"See that's the problem," Matteo responded, "Football has nothing to do with national pride, it's about the passion of the game, that love for the game, hope that even a backward nation playing the flamenco football can become the strongest in the world."

"Over here, the passion and hope for the win feels manufactured and almost expected of us; otherwise, we are a letdown. PR campaigns, brand deals, and hype based on our intangible potential. One day it's euphoria, the next day it's abandonment. Is that what you want to represent?" He paused for a second, letting his words sink in. "I grew up playing football wherever I could just to grasp a bit of what Pele felt when he brought the world to Brazil when Maradona's hand of god led Argentina to win their second World Cup, do I need to say more?"

Yunus stared at Matteo, absorbing every charged word. There was a gravity behind Matteo's statement that left little room for argument—a raw desire to become a legend, to be remembered like the football icons he'd listed. It also became glaring that he did not believe that representing America would allow him to achieve his goals, no matter what they said. Giovanni shifted uneasily; the usual swagger he carried on the field was missing because, unlike the other two, he had no second option unless he chose to immigrate or take on a second nationality.

"So that's really it for you, huh?" Giovanni asked softly. He leaned forward and laced his fingers on the table. "You're deciding between a place that loves the game like you do and us, where the national team sometimes feels more like marketing hype. You'd walk away from all the kids who bought your jersey, chanting your name in the stands with their faces painted red, white, and blue?"

Matteo set his fork down, rubbing the tension out of his temples before letting out a slow breath. "You know what, Fuck them kids. That same marketing hype you were talking about is the only reason I'm even here. If I didn't owe my agent a favour, I'd be in Valencia getting on with my real life."

"As for the kids you were talking about, if they are my true fans, they will support me wherever I play. I don't play for them and their hopes and dreams; I play for that little kid whose dreams carried him out of Ladbroke Grove; anyone else's expectations can't even match a hundredth of his."

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[12/11/2019, Location: Upper East Side, NY]

Outside the restaurant's ornate doors, Oliver Burke paused under the warm glow of a street lamp. He could still hear the subdued hum of the evening crowd behind him, conversations mingling with clinking glasses in that distinctly pretentious Upper East Side ambience. His gut churned. He had dealt with

braggarts and bullies before, but Jason Hart, Joe, and Greg were on a different level—men who'd leverage anything for a quick win, men who only saw players as commodities to be traded, hyped, or discarded.

They were even worse than football clubs in the sense that they saw players as walking billboards for their stock prices. The memory of their smug expressions gnawed at him like an itch he couldn't scratch. Usually, he didn't care as he understood that this was how the game worked, but Matteo was the one player he wouldn't let anyone throw under the bus.

The kid had never let him down on the field and didn't make many demands as long as he got to play football and improve his career. From a young age, he let him plan his career, trusting his vision, which only came into question with this whole Rakim fiasco. Still, the kid who had told him, "Bet on me and I will become a star," has become something like a son to him, and he would do anything to further his career.

The fact that they could both earn a lot of money doing so was also a bonus, as he enjoyed watching him dominate on the field. Sighing, he hailed a taxi with a sharp whistle, sliding into the back seat and drumming impatient fingers against the leather. As the car pulled away, he felt a tide of resentment surging within. He didn't mind conflict, but what stung was the fact they refused to finalize Matteo's payment after the U-20 fiasco.

He would have his vengeance, though, when it was time to renegotiate and make them pay what's owed ten times over or his name isn't Oliver Douglas Burke. Oliver hesitated. "JFK, please," he muttered, leaning his head against the seat. He needed to clear his thoughts and come up with a game plan.

Chapter 458 458 Little Anna-Marie

[13/11/2019, Location: Motor Lublin Arena, 19:20]

The crowd at Motor Lublin Arena was already a roaring beast, its voice echoing across the darkening sky as anticipation swirled through the air like wildfire. The stadium lights burned bright, shining down on the freshly cut grass that stretched out like an emerald carpet, waiting to be torn apart by the upcoming clash.

Banners draped in red and black fluttered along the stands, their colours merging with the sea of fans dressed in jerseys and scarves. The South Koreans chanted with relentless passion; their synchronized roars filled with national pride that reverberated throughout the venue. Meanwhile, the German supporters countered with their own thunderous support, voices deep and resolute, waving flags and singing battle hymns.

The players were yet to emerge from the tunnel, but the pre-match tension was already building to a fever pitch. Everyone present knew that this wasn't just a game—it was a battle for the right to stand on the world's grandest stage, or for the right to be able to say that my country's next generation is the best in the world, which signalled the possibility for a real-world trophy.

However, above the noise and energy, high above in the sleek, glass-fronted VIP lounge, the atmosphere was vastly different. It almost resembled a modern ball or a gathering of elites in ancient Rome, ready to watch gladiators do battle for their entertainment. The room offered an almost broadcast-like view of the field, the kind you would see in video games like FC, perfect for those who preferred luxury to the frenzy of the common stands. Soft leather seats, elegant decor, and gourmet refreshments arranged on polished tables created a refined contrast to the chaotic energy outside.

Businessmen in tailored suits murmured in hushed tones, their attention split between conversations of profit margins and the match soon to unfold. A few celebrities mingled with their entourages, most eager to be seen at the event of the evening, phones flashing as they documented their attendance. Most had only attended the game after realising just how much attention this tournament, which should have been just another youth competition was getting.

However, some genuinely loved the game or showed up to support their family members or simply their home country. Among them were two figures that drew a few glances from the others but maintained a



distance from the small crowd. Lisa Madeline Rex, a beautiful lady in her mid-thirties who might as well have been in her late twenties as she sat back with the elegance of the businesswoman that she was.

She was dressed in a stylish beige suit that accentuated her natural grace, her turquoise-gold eyes glinting like precious stones under the soft lights. Her light blond hair was pulled back into a sleek bun with two curly strands framing a face that carried both beauty and authority.

Beside her sat May Parker, her appearance was equally striking but a touch more delicate. May wore a grey suit jacket over a crisp white shirt, its top buttons left open to give her outfit a relaxed, carefree edge. A matching belt was tied loosely at the front, hanging with an effortless style that looked almost unintentional. Rather than suit pants, she opted for a matching skirt that reached the top half of her thighs, giving her a youthful touch.

Her white ankle socks were mostly hidden by the classic white Adidas sneakers she wore, their black stripes and green-and-white Adidas flower logo on the tongues completing the look. Draped over her shoulder was a small red handbag, matching her black glasses that had a light rosy tint to them. May's peach blond hair fell in loose waves down her shoulders, framing her sharp green eyes that flickered between the field below and the phone clutched in her hand.

She had taken the pictures she needed for the day to keep her socials active and simply wanted to watch the match like a regular fan. She would be lying if she said that she didn't prefer Basketball over football, but she felt like she was watching a movie live whenever she saw her boyfriend play. For this sole reason, she liked to put her full attention on the field when he played, rarely posting pictures of her while he was playing.

Just as the pre-match proceedings were about to begin, the doors to the VIP lounge swung open. Two new arrivals entered, drawing a few casual glances from the room's occupants. The man moved with a smooth, effortless confidence, his dark hair neatly styled and his piercing blue eyes sweeping over the room with cool precision. He wore a tailored charcoal suit that fit him with the kind of perfection only achieved by a personal stylist or a closet filled with outfits with which one couldn't miss even when trying.

Beside him was a little girl who seemed to be a bundle of energy barely contained within her ten-year-old frame. Her wavy chestnut hair tumbled over her shoulders, and her bright, confident eyes darted around the room as if she were already deciding who was worth her attention and who wasn't. She wore a designer jacket over a T-shirt that featured a stylized image of Rakim mid-Griddy doing his signature celebration as his deadlocks swayed.

"Oh wow, Daddy, look!" she exclaimed, her voice cutting through the soft murmur of conversation as she pointed toward the glass window. "That's where he's gonna be! But aren't we too far from the pitch? He won't even hear me cheer him on from all the way up here,"

Her father smiled at her veiled complaint, wondering where all her etiquette lessons had gone. "Sweetheart, if he's as good as you say, he'll feel your support even from here," he replied with an amused grin, his deep voice carrying a warmth reserved only for his daughter.

She puffed her cheeks, clearly unsatisfied. "But Daddy, that's not enough! What if he needs to hear me shouting his name when he scores? You know, like real fans do."

The man chuckled, steering her gently toward an unoccupied spot by the glass window. "How about we take a seat, and you cheer as loud as you want? I'm sure your favourite player will hear you even over the crowd."

Her expression brightened instantly. "You're right! And if not, I'll just have to be even louder. I still can't believe that big sister actually got to meet him in person. I'm so jealous,"

She plopped down on her designated plush leather seat upon exiting the glass doors that separated the stadium and the luxurious VIP lounge not at all paying attention to the blonde pair of women sitting next to her. She was practically bouncing with excitement as she leaned forward to get a better view of the pitch, already enamoured with the atmosphere. The players were beginning to walk out of the tunnel, their heads held high as they emerged into the cacophony of noise that awaited them. The sight of Germany's familiar white and black kits immediately caught her attention.

"Daddy! There he is!" she squealed, practically vibrating with excitement. "Number twenty-two! That's him! Rakim Rex! Oh my gosh, he looks even cooler in person!"

The man settled into his seat beside her, his smile widening at her enthusiasm. His gaze briefly roamed over the other occupants in the VIP section, noting the polished elegance of the lounge. He recognised a few of the businessmen, having dealt with them in the past, but didn't bother going to start a conversation. He was here to spend time with his daughter, who, unlike his older daughter, was the definition of a tomboy, causing him to sometimes treat her like the son he never had.

His gaze involuntarily travelled to the two women sitting next to his daughter, nodding politely in greeting upon making eye he refocused on his daughter. "Yes, sweetheart. It's him," he replied, chuckling. "You know, you're making it sound like we flew across the world just to see him play."

"But we did, didn't we?" she retorted, her smile turning cheeky as she folded her arms, practically daring him to deny it.

He shook his head, ruffling her wavy chestnut hair. "Maybe you did little Anna-Marie, but Daddy has to work for a living, otherwise, I couldn't afford to keep sponsoring your team."

"Don't worry, Daddy, if you don't have money, I will just ask Mommy, she makes one movie and boom we can swim like Scrooge McDuck," Anna-Marie said in a matter-of-fact tone as she looked into her

dad's blue eyes and patted his shoulders to soothe him. Barley able to keep his facial features straight he could already tell that his daughter actually believed that not knowing that he was the largest investor for all his wife's projects and films.

Not willing to shatter his daughter's worldview, he simply pointed to the field, redirecting her attention. "Look, they're about to start."

Chapter 459 459 Lightning Attack

[13/11/2019, Location: Motor Lublin Arena, 19:28]

The stadium's roar grew to a deafening pitch as the referee blew his whistle, the match officially underway. The floodlights beamed down like thousands of tiny suns, illuminating every blade of grass and every bead of sweat on the players' brows.

Paul Gartner's voice spilled out from the speakers with the practised eloquence of a seasoned commentator. "Hello, ladies and Gentlemen to the semifinal clash between Germany and South Korea, and what a spectacle it promises to be! Germany in their traditional white and black, while South Korea sports their red and blue, their fans thundering with chants that could rival an earthquake."

"This promises to be an electrifying clash here at the Under-20 World Cup semifinals as both teams have given us some of the most spectacular moments during this tournament. Let's have a look at the line-ups of both teams first the German side lining up in a familiar 4-3-3 formation, a set-up designed for high-pressure attacking football with a solid midfield core." He continued as the players took their positions on their respective sides under the cheer of their fans.

Gartner's voice was crisp and clear, his words painting the scene for viewers and listeners at home as the cameras panned over the German team taking their positions. "Starting between the sticks for Germany is Jan Olschowsky, making his tournament debut as Luca Unbehaun is rested due to fatigue reasons after the 120-minute clash with USA, where he came in clutch in the penalty shootout."

His partner for today's game, Mark Stewart, continued the analysis as he remembered to do his job. "In defence, on the left flank, we have Noah Katterbach, who has been solid all tournament, guarding that flank, giving Rakim the freedom to create chances. On the opposite side, Antonis Aidonis, a versatile fullback who is just as comfortable pressing high as he is holding his line, replaces Simon Asta as today's starting right back."

"Armel Bella-Kotchap reprises his role as the defensive leader as the team's starting centre-back and is joined by Malik Talabidi who is also making his tournament debut." The camera shifted to the midfield trio; their faces locked in concentration. "Anchoring the midfield is the ever-reliable Angelo Stiller, who has been his team's engine throughout the tournament. He is joined by the creative dynamo Florian Wirtz and alongside Kevin Shade, a box-to-box midfielder."

Paul's voice lifted slightly with excitement as the camera closed in on the German frontline. "Now, we turn to the firepower up front. On the right, we have the speedster, Jamie Leweling. Leading the line is the ever-dangerous Youssoufa Moukoko. And finally, on the left wing, the sensation himself, Rakim Rex. His skill, creativity, and sheer audacity have left defenders in knots. Expect him to play a pivotal role tonight."

The camera transitioned to the South Korean players taking their positions, their faces equally intense under the blazing stadium lights. "And now to South Korea, who have shown remarkable resilience and tactical discipline throughout this tournament. They're lining up in a 4–2–3–1 formation, a setup designed to absorb pressure and strike with lethal counterattacks."

Paul Gartner's voice carried on, brimming with energy and precision. "In goal for South Korea, it's Lee Gwang-yeon of Gangwon FC. The defensive line starts with Choi Jun at right-back, a tireless worker capable of bombing down the flank to support attacks when needed. On the opposite side, Hwang Tae-hyeon from Daejeon Hana Citizen, a full-back who's just as comfortable breaking forward as he is defending. The centre-back pairing is Lee Jae-ik, of SC Freiburg, alongside Im Hyun-woo from Dinamo Zagreb, a no-nonsense defender with an excellent sense of positioning."

Mark Stewart chimed in, his tone steady and analytical. "Moving on to the midfield double pivot, it's Kim Jung-min from FC Liefering and Hong Hyun-seok from FC Juniors OÖ. The duo has formed a sturdy partnership, Kim's defensive discipline allowing Hong to push forward and initiate quick counters."

The cameras panned to the South Korean attacking trio, capturing their fierce expressions. "Now, here's where things get particularly interesting. On the right, Eom Won-sang of Gwangju FC is a blistering winger with the pace to burn past any defender. On the left, Jeong Woo-yeong from SC Freiburg, a dynamic forward capable of cutting inside and delivering dangerous balls into the box."

"And pulling the strings in the centre," Mark Stewart added, "is the one everyone's been talking about, Lee Kang-in of Valencia CF. His vision and creativity are the heartbeat of this South Korean attack. He has been producing attacking chances for this team, leading them all the way to the semifinals against teams like Argentina and Japan."

"Finally, leading the line is the powerful Oh Se-hun from Ulsan Hyundai," Paul Gartner concluded. "A striker who excels at holding the ball up and bringing his teammates into play. He'll be looking to use his physicality to unsettle that German backline."

The match was seconds away from kick-off, the tension building like the final calm before a violent storm. The stadium's intensity seeped into the VIP lounge, the echoing chants of fans below vibrating through the glass walls. However, to those seated in the area in front of the box, they were already enamoured in the atmosphere, only awaiting the whistle to be blown.

Anna-Marie leaned forward in her seat; eyes locked on the field like a hawk eyeing its prey. Her fingers drummed rhythmically against the leather armrest, her excitement a living thing that danced along her limbs.

"Daddy, this is it! Oh my gosh, I can't believe I'm actually watching him play live!" she exclaimed, her words tumbling over one another in her enthusiasm. She didn't have to wait long as the Referee completed his final checks as he took his position around the middle of the field.

Paul Gartner's voice continued to flow through the speakers like a storyteller guiding his audience through the opening act. "And the referee checks his watch... and we're off! Germany versus South Korea in this Under-20 World Cup semifinal! The stakes could not be higher, folks. Both teams are hungry for glory, both are determined to prove their strength on the grandest stage of youth football."

The ball was immediately taken by South Korea, Lee Kang-in receiving it from Oh Se-hun, who had knocked it back to him with a delicate touch. Kang-in's control was immaculate, his body already moving to shield the ball from Angelo Stiller's press. Korea decided to attack early, and they did just that from the opening whistle as Oh Se-hun used a shimmy of the shoulder to escape Stiller's mark.

Without hesitation, he slotted the ball to his left into the run of his team's right-mid Eom Won-sang, who sped past Rakim. Latching onto the ball before Noah Katterbach could interfere, he used a feint inward to snake past on the flank. Noah turned on his heels, giving chase, doing his best to catch up with him as they barrelled down the final third.

Reacting instinctively, Noah slid forward his foot stretched to that max, but it was too late as Eom Won-sang had already fired a cross inward. The cross came in fast and low, the ball slicing through the air like a heat-seeking missile aimed directly at the crowded penalty area. The German defence scrambled, boots clattering against the grass as they tried to get into position.

Armel Bella-Kotchap barked orders, his voice cutting through the chaos. "Mark your man! Watch the runners!" But his warnings came just a fraction of a second too late. Oh Se-hun was already on the move, his large frame barrelling toward the near post. With a powerful stride, he threw himself into the path of the cross, his body contorted as he met the ball with a diving header.

Jan Olschowsky reacted on pure instinct, his gloved hands shooting out as he dived low to his right. THUD! The ball struck the keeper's palms, the force rattling through his wrists as he clutched it tight to his chest. Paul Gartner's voice cracked through the speakers. "And what a save by Jan Olschowsky! That was a lightning-quick attack from South Korea, but the young keeper showed his composure with a fantastic stop to deny Oh Se-hun's header!"

Anna-Marie let out a gasp, her fingers gripping the armrests. "Oh my gosh! That was so close! Daddy, did you see that?"

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[13/11/2019, Location: Motor Lublin Arena, Time: 19:35]

[5]

In the fifth minute, Germany nearly drew first blood after a string of controlled passes. Kevin Schade suddenly turned and chipped a high ball into the left channel. Rakim Rex, already in motion, darted past Choi Jun, chested the ball down as it dropped from the lights, and flicked it past the defender in the same motion. Cheers surged from the German fans in anticipation of how this attack would develop.

Now inside the box, he dragged the ball across his body with the outside of his left foot, cutting back as he baited Lee Jae-ik into committing. Lee bit. Rakim paused, nudged the ball through his open legs as he rounded the defender. Without hesitation, he fired a low-driven shot to the near post, Lee Gwang-yeon came in clutch, pulling off a spectacular save.

He had managed to read the shot perfectly, dropped low in an instant to parry the strike wide. Not cleanly, but just enough, but it was good enough to keep his teams on level terms. The crowd gasped, a moment of brilliance that was denied by quick reflexes, but the Korean fans were content with the result.



In the commentary booth, Paul Gartner's voice echoed over the sound system, animated and just slightly breathless. "What a dazzling move from Rakim! That little shimmy and nutmeg, that's why the kid is box office. But take nothing away from Lee Gwang-yeon—sharp and ready between the posts."

Mark Stewart leaned closer to his mic. "Germany is testing Korea's resolve early. Rakim's early drive could force them to pay more attention to him, and this could open things up for Moukoko or Wirtz if they read the moments."

The following corner didn't result in much with Germany's Malik Talabidi sending a header into the stands after a hard-fought aerial duel with Lee Jae-ik. Germany's high press remained relentless in the minutes that followed. Angelo Stiller and Florian Wirtz showed strong synergy in midfield, circulating the ball quickly, probing for weaknesses in the Korean block.

South Korea, to their credit, didn't panic. Kim Jung-min dropped deep alongside Hong Hyun-seok, forming a two-man anchor, trying to stall Germany's build-up. The Korean line stayed compact, daring Germany to work through the middle. Rakim got more involved as he was given space to operate under the Korean defensive formation.

In the 9th minute, he peeled wide again, hugging the left touchline. Katterbach spotted him and released a chipped pass that whistled just above Eom Won-sang's outstretched boot. Rakim killed the ball with his instep, then flicked it forward with his heel, skipping into open space. He surged ahead, then shifted his body in a sudden deceleration as Choi Jun closed in to mark him.

Choi Jun closed in quickly, matching Rakim stride for stride—but the German winger was in rhythm now. With one smooth drag-back, Rakim created a sliver of space, then danced his boot over the ball twice before flipping it behind his standing leg, a move that left Choi flat-footed. Gasps rippled through the stands as Rakim skipped into the final third, before curling a teasing trivella cross with his right foot to the edge of the six-yard box.

The ball sliced across the box, flying past Moukoko, who was tightly guarded by Kim Hyun-woo and Lee Jae-ik, dropping near the back post. Jamie Leweling went airborne, throwing his head at it—but Kim Hyun-woo met him mid-flight, getting just enough of his shoulder on the ball to deflect it skyward. The referee's whistle stayed silent as a scramble the ball ensued.

Moukoko reacted faster and pivoted out of his tight marking and struck the ball on the bounce, but his shot pinged off the underside of Lee Jae-ik's thigh and spun wide for another corner. "Germany is knocking at Korea's door, and they have the right answers to deny them." Paul Gartner observed. "Rakim's clearly in the mood, and that's bad news for the Korean backline."

"You can see the hesitation creeping in," Mark Stewart added. "They simply can't stand off him, giving a player of his Caliber that much space to operate is asking for trouble. But the moment you over-commit, you leave Wirtz and Moukoko unmarked—and that's how you get punished."

"They have some choices to make and need to choose the lesser poison of whom is less likely to be more of a problem. Right now, that is proving to be Rakim who won't give Choi Jun a moment of rest," Paul Gartner intoned as the referee paused the match for the Korean medical staff to attend to Lee Jae-ik's who stayed down after the ball impacted his thigh.

The medical team quickly assessed Lee Jae-ik on the pitch, applying a cold spray to his thigh and stretching his leg. He gingerly rose to his feet moments later, nodding to the referee that he was okay to continue, prompting applause from the South Korean fans. Play resumed with Germany's corner, taken short by Rakim and Wirtz at the right corner flag. The young winger exchanged passes quickly with Florian, shifting positions up and down that flank as they drew in more defenders.

Suddenly, Wirtz, close to the corner flag, sent a long pass to the edge of the box into the feet of Antonis Aidonis, Germany's right back. The full back did not hesitate in sending an in swinging cross toward the near post. Armel Bella-Kotchap met the ball around the penalty spot with a powerful leap, his header crashing against the crossbar, reverberating through the Motor Lublin Arena.

"Off the bar!" Gartner exclaimed. "Bella-Kotchap just inches from opening the scoring!"

Stewart leaned forward, adding, "South Korea's struggling to handle Germany's aerial threat. They've dodged a bullet, but they can't rely on luck for much longer."

South Korea tried to relieve pressure by moving swiftly on the counter as Choi Jun sent a through ball into the run of Lee Kang-in. Since he was the creative brain of the Korean team, he had been guarding near the edge of the box for the corner, so when the chance presented itself, he surged forward. He latched onto the ball at the edge of the middle third, speeding forward as he glided up the left flank.

The crowd roared in anticipation as Lee Kang-in streaked down the left flank, eating up yards with surprising pace. Malik Talabidi, one of Germany's centre backs, scrambled back desperately, trying to cut off the angle. The Valencia midfielder, aware of the pressure closing in, swept the ball inside with his left foot, sending it spinning perfectly into the path of Jeong Woo-yeong, who surged up from midfield.

Taking the ball in stride, he dribbled forward, battling shoulder to shoulder with a recovering Angelo Stiller. Despite his thinner frame, he remained composed and slippery, using Stiller's force to propel himself forward. Playing a quick one-two at the edge of the box with Oh Se-hun, he gained a meter of space as he entered the box from the right side.

The roar from the stands intensified as Jeong Woo-yeong expertly shielded the ball from Noah Katterbach, his balance remarkable as he twisted and pivoted into the German box. Just as he wound up to shoot, Malik Talabidi surged in from the side, extending his leg and executing a perfectly timed sliding tackle. They both hit the ball at almost the same time, but it was Jeong who won out as the ball skipped up from the ground, spinning wildly as it flew towards the goal.

Jan Olschowsky reacted instantly, pushing off with his right foot and diving full-stretch to his left. Time slowed in the packed Motor Lublin Arena, the German fans holding their breath, the South Koreans rising to their feet with hope swelling. The ball, spinning unpredictably, dipped sharply, seemingly destined for the bottom corner. But Olschowsky's fingertips grazed it just enough, sending it wide of the upright.

A collective sigh erupted from the Korean section, quickly overtaken by applause for the German keeper's miraculous intervention. "What a save by Olschowsky!" Paul Gartner exclaimed. "He had virtually no reaction time, yet he still managed to keep Germany level!"

Mark Stewart chuckled appreciatively, adding, "It's turning into a goalkeeper showdown tonight. First Lee Gwang-yeon denies Rakim, now Olschowsky keeps Jeong out. These keepers are earning their keep early!"

The ensuing corner saw Lee Kang-in swing in a viciously curling cross towards the near post. Armel Bella-Kotchap rose powerfully to head clear, but the ball fell invitingly at the edge of the box to Kim Jung-min. Without hesitation, Kim lashed a venomous half-volley through traffic. Olschowsky, momentarily unsighted, could only watch as the ball whistled mere inches above his crossbar.