

Football 481

Chapter 481 481 We Are The Champions

Under the soft glow of Stadion Widzewa Łódź's floodlights, the German U-20 squad stood proudly along the vivid blue carpet that stretched to the podium. Each player wore a fresh white t-shirt emblazoned with "U-20 World Cup Champions 2019" in bold gold lettering, their smiles radiant, their fatigue forgotten amidst triumph. A respectful tunnel of applause awaited their English counterparts, who approached with sorrow etched across their youthful faces.

Lord Benedict Ravenscroft, the tournament's principal patron, stood tall and composed at the centre of the podium. Elegantly attired in a charcoal suit, the subtle gleam of his Ravenscroft family crest pin caught the stadium lights, exuding his natural authority. Beside him stood Arsène Wenger, who, a month earlier, had taken on the job as Chief of Global Football Development at FIFA. His kindly eyes surveyed the emerging talents with paternal pride.

The English squad ascended first, their applause graciously echoed by the Germans, who knew exactly how narrowly victory had been achieved. The first in England's line, captain Declan Rice, mounted the rostrum with shoulders squared. Lord Ravenscroft met him with a firm handshake and a few solemn words that no microphone caught. Arsène Wenger slipped the silver medal over Rice's bowed head, its satin ribbon pooling against a jersey still damp from ninety-plus minutes of effort.

One by one, the English players followed—Henderson, Saka, Foden, Bellingham—each acknowledged with respectful applause from the German contingent massed below. Some managed faint smiles: others stared into the middle distance; eyes glassy. When Bukayo Saka stepped up, he paused long enough to bump fists with Rakim before walking up the steps to receive his silver medal.

A marshal raised his arm. "Deutschland, bitte."

A tremor of anticipation rippled through the German line. Rakim led the German line with Armel Bella-Kotchap, the official captain, making up the rear, ready to lift the trophy. Rakim inhaled, tasting the metallic tang of fireworks still drifting beneath the roof, then stepped onto the wide first tread of the carpet. The rumble that greeted him began deep in the German end, "Rakim...The Dream...Rakim Rakim..." and rolled around the bowl until even neutral sections joined in, clapping to the chant's driving beat.

Rakim inhaled, tasting the metallic tang of fireworks still drifting in the night air as he quickly alighted the 3 steps to the podium. Taking in the view that seemed so much grander now that he was on the podium, causing a bright smile to creep onto his face. Raising his arms to spur the crowd on, prompting the cheers to rise to another level.

Rakim lowered his arms when the chants crescendo as he approached the well-dressed man, who stood imposingly in his charcoal grey suit. Lord Ravenscroft offered his hand. Up close, Rakim finally took in the man whose presence seemed to have been pushed up for this award ceremony. He looked younger than the streaks of silver at his temples suggested, and with handsome facial features for his age, the angles softened by a clean shave.

Thick, dark locs—taper-faded at the sides and swept neatly back—lent him an effortless, stylish edge beneath the stadium lights. But it was his eyes that caught Rakim off-guard: a startling, ice-green hue that seemed almost luminous against the night.

Those eyes were almost as bright as his own, which caught him off guard for a moment, but he quickly snapped back to attention. "Congratulations, son, that was a game worthy of a final." Rakim's fingers closed around a firm handshake without being overbearing. "Thanks' sir."

Ravenscroft's grip lingered half a beat, then released as Rakim moved on to stand in front of the legendary Arsenal coach Arsène Wenger. Wenger's familiar warm smile, he had only seen on TV during post-match interviews or his iconic retirement ceremony. Which, if he were being honest, is the only one he can remember, as most coaches never receive such a heartfelt sendoff by their clubs unless they are being exploited for promotion.

"Le Professeur," Rakim said, dipping his head with genuine respect.

Wenger's smile widened the fine lines at the corners of his eyes folding like well-worn pages. "I have been called worse," he chuckled in that soft Strasbourg lilt. "Your performance tonight reminded me why I took this new role. " He slipped the gleaming gold medal over Rakim's neck and, with a conspiratorial wink, added, "And why defenders still lose sleep before facing true dribblers."

The metal was cool against Rakim's collarbone—heavy enough to make his pulse thrum louder in his ears. He stepped aside as Wirtz arrived next, then turned to watch the rest of the line file past Lord Ravenscroft and Wenger. Every new medal set off another roar from the German end.

Wirtz, cheeks still streaked with drying sweat, received his medal next. He pressed it to his lips before standing next to him, eyes gleaming in joy as they waited for the rest of their teammates to join them. Before long, the rest of the squad had joined them on the podium, including the coaching staff and were eagerly awaiting the individual accolades to be handed out.

Wenger stepped back to the microphone mounted discreetly on a slim lectern. "The individual honours," he announced, his voice carrying easily across the cauldron of noise, "begin with the Golden Glove."

A graphic flashed on the stadium screens—Dean Henderson—and the English keeper jolted in surprise from below the stage. A ripple of genuine applause rose from both sets of supporters as he made the short walk back to Ravenscroft and Wenger. Henderson accepted the bronze-gold trophy, touched its curved surface once to his forehead in thanks, then moved to alight the stage quickly.

Henderson slipped back down the steps cradling his trophy, a shy wave acknowledging the cheers that rippled after him. Wenger waited until the applause ebbed, then tapped the microphone once more. "And now, the adidas Golden Boot—top scorer of the tournament with a record-breaking thirteen goals in one tournament..."

The stadium screens bloomed with a familiar image: RAKIM REX – 13 GOALS. The German end detonated. A few English supporters even joined the clapping, appreciation outweighing disappointment. Rakim stepped forward with a bright smile, joining Lord Ravenscroft and Sir Arsene Wenger at the front of the stage.

"A predator's tally, may it be the first of many." Lord Ravenscroft voiced as he shook hands with both before accepting the golden boot-shaped statue. Haaland won the bronze boot, and Matteo took home the Silver, but since neither of the two were still in the country, they couldn't take a picture with all 3. Rakim didn't mind, though, as he stood in the middle of the two men for a second to pose for the cameras.

"Finally," the Alsatian intoned, voice carrying crisp and clear beneath the roof, "The Bronze Ball of the FIFA U-20 World Cup 2019 goes to..."

"Florian Wirtz," A joyous gasp burst from the German contingent. Wirtz's eyes shot wide; Not knowing what to do for a second, he was lightly shoved forward to receive his accolade. He quickly shook hands with the two men, smiling brightly as they took pictures for the press.

After he stepped to the side, the Alsatian continued with his job and announced the Silverball winner. The selection surprised everybody as he had barely played more than half an hour in the final, but his assist tally surpassed the second place by two. However, it was his key passes and dribbles that led to goals that really managed to put him ahead of Wirtz.

"The Adidas Silver Ball," he proclaimed, "for the second-best player of the tournament, is awarded to... Jamal Musiala of England." He swiftly alighted the stage to receive his silver ball, taking pictures with the two men much like Wirtz did before.

Shortly, the announcer continued his job, announcing the tournament's overall MVP, "And the Adidas Golden Ball, recognising the best overall player of the FIFA U-20 World Cup 2019..." He paused, allowing the crowd a collective breath. "Rakim Rex—Germany!"

Then the German end erupted, a tidal wave of red-gold-black flags and voices chanting his name. Stepping up, he went through the motions with both men again, sharing a few words and another photo op. A second later, all three players took a picture together with Rakim front and centre.

[Ding:...]

Medal presentations finished; a pair of attendants wheeled the U-20 World Cup itself to centre-stage. The attendants guided the velvet-lined cart to the podium's centre and drew back a silk cover, revealing the FIFA U-20 World Cup trophy in all its intricate glory.

Forged from mirror-bright sterling silver, the cup rose from a circular, midnight-black onyx base in three slender, twisting spires that seemed to braid together as they climbed. At their apex, they cradled a polished gilt football, its pentagons and hexagons picked out by hair-thin etching that caught every wandering beam of light. The contrast of liquid silver and warm gold made the whole piece look as if moonlight itself were holding the sun aloft.

Delicate engravings—past champions' names in fine serif script—spiralled up each ribbon of metal, and nearer the base, a faint opalescent sheen shimmered like northern lights whenever the trophy turned beneath the floodlights. Up close, the spires were so precisely machined that they reflected the stadium

in three perfect, serpentine mirrors: tiers of fans, volleys of flashbulbs, and the line of white-shirted German teenagers standing breathless in anticipation.

Armel Bella-Kotchap took 3 long strides, appearing in front of the trophy with a huge smile. The German contingent behind him animatedly lowered their upper body, starting a drum roll just as Armel grasped the trophy. He turned, facing his teammates, approaching them as he kept the trophy low.

Armel halted a metre short of the semicircle his teammates had formed, shoulders rolling once, twice. "Eins ... zwei ... drei!" The entire squad surged upward with a roar as he hoisted the trophy high. Silver caught floodlight, gold seams flared, and a snowstorm of white-and-gold confetti burst overhead in perfect sync with the chorus of Queen's We Are the Champions.

Chapter 482 482 Welcome Home

[20/11/2019 | Time: 13:00 | Location: Düsseldorf Airport]

Rakim felt a gentle jolt as the wheels of their Lufthansa flight touched down at Düsseldorf Airport. He glanced sideways at Florian, who had dozed off, headphones slightly askew. Smiling softly, Rakim nudged him awake.

"Wirtzy boy, we're home," he teased as he proceeded to flick his friend on the head, waking him from his light sleep.

Florian rubbed his eyes, blinking rapidly as his eyes quickly adjusted to the light. "Already? I felt like we'd just left Poland a moment ago."

"Yeah, so get up or you'll be flying right back to Poland," Rakim retorted as he fished out his carry-on LV duffel bag and the smaller Essential pouch with his valuables. He was dressed in a Navy Sainclair suit from his sponsors, brown loafers, and his silver Air King watch.

"Naw, airlines are too stingy to take me on a free return flight, it would just unlock a side story," He retorted with a light smile but got up from his comfortable cabin, nonetheless. He was also dressed in a navy suit originating from the Armani designer, giving him a mature look.

"If you know your purpose and your compass stays true, you will never get lost on branching paths," Rakim responded, channelling a sagely demeanour as he looked out the window, letting the afternoon sun hit him at just the right angle.

(Thwack) A second later, a blue neck pillow hit the back of his head, completely ruining the moment. "Just hurry up, we are probably holding up the people in the economy section." Wirtz retorted as he proceeded to head to the back, where the stairs were located just behind the thick grey curtains. "Where does he even get these fortune cookie quotes?"

They quickly navigated through customs, their priority boarding in business class did its thing by protecting them from regular passengers. Surprisingly, they weren't bothered by anyone in the business suit either, with most folks just ignoring them as they were simply too busy completing last-minute assignments. Only when they went through Grenz controlle, (Customs) were they finally recognised by the border police handling their entry into the country?

After a couple of rounds of selfies and signing some hats, they were let through with little fuss. At the arrivals gate stood Matthias, one of Leverkusen's staff members, holding a welcoming sign emblazoned with the Bayer Leverkusen crest. "Welcome back, boys," Matthias greeted warmly, ushering them towards a sleek Mercedes Sprinter van waiting just outside. "I hope your journey treated you kindly."

Rakim was the one to reply after stuffing his Beats headphones into his small LV essentials bag meant for his daily necessities. "It wasn't too bad, slept through most of it?"

Matthias chuckled as he opened the van door for them. "Good. You both deserve a good rest after the show you put on over the tournament. All of us are proud of what we witnessed and can't wait to see you light up the Bay Arena, lord knows we need it right now."

Rakim nearly hummed at the man's words as he climbed into the van first, settling into the middle row of plush leather seats. Wirtz followed, tossing his duffel casually onto the seat next to him. The van pulled away from the terminal smoothly, the low hum of the engine filling the quiet space as Matthias manoeuvred them out toward the autobahn.

Outside the tinted windows, Düsseldorf sped past — grey skies streaked with pale sunlight, neat lines of trees flashing by, the pulse of the city fading into the open roads. "So, the team has been struggling, huh?" Wirtz finally voiced the obvious question that Rakim was too lazy to ask.

"Struggling isn't the word I would use, it's just we have been all over the place, 3 draws, 1 loss and 1 win this month. We are still in the top six, but we have lost some of our early momentum." Matthias lamented with a sigh as he stepped down on the throttle, seemingly releasing his frustration.

"At least we beat Atletico in the Champions League group stage?" Wirtz tried to comfort the man who loved the club with a passion.

Matthias offered a tired smile through the rear-view mirror. "Yeah, that win kept our heads above water. But we need more consistency. We beat strong teams but stumble against weak ones."


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[20/11/2019 | Time: 13:27 | Location: Leverkusen – Bayer 04 Training Grounds]

As the Sprinter van rolled past the security gates of the Bayer Leverkusen training complex, the mood inside the vehicle shifted. From the outside, everything looked normal — a typical November day in western Germany, chilly with patches of sun darting through the clouds. But the moment the van eased to a stop in front of the club's headquarters, Rakim noticed the faint stir of movement behind the tinted glass lobby doors.

"Wait... what's with the—" Rakim began, but the van doors slid open before he could finish.

"Congratulations!"

A burst of cheers, clapping, and a few vuvuzelas sounded off as staff members, youth academy players, and even a few first-team squad members stepped forward. Red and black streamers fluttered in the wind, and a modest "Welcome Back, Champions!" banner stretched across the entrance. There were a few club photographers positioned around, already snapping pictures of the returning duo.

Wirtz froze in place for a second. "Bro... is this for us?"

Rakim chuckled as he stepped down. "I mean, we did just win a trophy, didn't we?"

Wirtz joined him, shaking his head in disbelief. "Man, that gave me a scare. I thought they were here to drag us to the training ground and make us work."

"Guess someone up there has a soft spot," Rakim murmured, eyeing the head of marketing, Marcus, who was giving thumbs up to the photographers. The man's sharp blazer and phone-in-hand pose gave away the PR spin already brewing.

Simon Rolfes stepped forward, his expression a blend of pride and calculated professionalism. "Gentlemen," he greeted, voice clear and warm. "What you achieved in Poland might not go down in the global football books just yet, but here at Leverkusen, we recognise what it means for our club and our future."

He extended a hand to both of them, shaking both their hands as the nearby staff cheered in joy. A second later, two staff members brought a large, white, exquisitely designed cake that depicted the U-20 World Cup trophy.

Florian let out a low whistle. "That cake's nicer than my birthday one."

"Probably cost more too," Rakim muttered with a grin, taking in the detailed frosting — his number 22 jersey etched in edible ink beside Wirtz's 7, both figures standing triumphant over a world map-shaped base. Someone had definitely gone the extra mile. "Though coach will probably have our necks if he sees us eat this."

A brief round of light-hearted laughter erupted around them as some of the players sympathised with the words. "Never mind him I'm more afraid of Dr. Clara, she will probably have me eating rice and boiled chicken for months."

"Don't worry, I'm willing to turn a blind eye for one slice for our returning heroes," Dr. Clara, the young nutritionist, said from the side as she adjusted the brim of her glasses. "You will have to make up for it during training, though."

"Ugh, I knew there was a catch to all this, they're gonna have us wrung dry," Wirtz loudly lamented, much to the pleasure of those around them. Despite his words, he still honestly cut the cake in ceremony so the kitchen staff could do the rest.

Just as the first slice of cake was ceremonially handed to Florian, who theatrically bowed before accepting it, the celebratory mood continued to blossom with the arrival of Manager Peter Bosz. Flanked by Assistant Manager Fredrick Bauer, the two carried an air of discipline softened by a proud glint in their eyes.

Bosz approached the pair, his steps even and deliberate. "You two made a statement," he said without preamble. "But now, the real work begins. International tournaments are.. What's the word side missions, as my kids like to say, no? The real work is the trenches of the Bundesliga, where you earn your wage."

"Yes, Sir," they both replied in unison as Wirtz wiped a bit of cream off his lip. "So... no extra recovery days?"

Fredrick let out a laugh. "We'll talk schedule in the morning. For now, enjoy the moment. You've earned it."

The crowd began to thin after another round of photos and warm handshakes. Rakim stood to the side for a moment, watching as the U-17 academy boys swarmed Wirtz for autographs, their eyes wide with

admiration. He had been one of them at the start of the season but had not only clawed his way up to the main team but had now won a trophy representing their country.

"I guess it's time to chase the next piece of silverware," Rakim muttered as his fork dug into his plate, savouring the red velvet-flavoured piece of cake.

{Maybe it's time we activated the challenge protocol?} Eva's voice sounded in his mind bringing a confused expression to his face.

Chapter 483 483 One Month

[Ding mission Future Great's progress:]

#Don't lose a match: L0/D1/W7 (Complete)

#Beat Javier Saviola's all-time Goal scoring record of 11 set in 2001: 13/11 (Complete)

#Win the Golden Boot: 1/1 (13, Goals) {Congratulations} (Complete)

#Lead your team to win the Mini World Cup: 1/1 {Congratulations} (Complete)

#Win the MVP award: 0/1 {TBD} (Complete)

Rewards: Calculated based on Performance and achievements: [One with the ball (growth Skill) earned: D]

Ding: >Football Technique grade has been raised: S -> S+

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"Well, that wasn't at all what I was expecting," I voiced after finally getting a chance to check in with the system. Honestly, I was just expecting a boatload of singularity points and a gift card, but this looks like it could be worth its weight in gold.

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\*One with the ball (growth type Skill): Grade D

- A skill that boosts the host's feel for the ball as if it's an extension of his limbs, depending on the effort put in to increase one's touch for the ball.

- 2% increase in the effectiveness of Football Technique-related drills.

(A skill that every great player of the game has mastered, no matter the position they have mastered.)

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{That is definitely a skill that could help you evolve your entire playstyle from the ground level. Though I'm quite surprised that you managed to draw it since it's quite a rare skill with the odds being 1 in a billion.} Eva said, snapping my attention back to the present.

"Yeah, well, that's for future me to worry about. For now, I just want to take a well-deserved rest." I said before falling onto my bed and slipping under the covers without a wasted moment. The coach had given us a four-day break, allowing us to return to the team after their game against Freiburg.

{Good night}

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[31 Days later]

[21/12/2019 | Time: 15:00 | Location: MEWA Arena]

"Yo, bro, I can't believe I finally get to make my first start for the team," Wirtz said from the bench next to mine as he retightened the straps of his boots.

It's really no different from coming off the bench, just play like you usually do, and you will be more than alright." I half-heartedly retorted as I continued to scroll through my phone, not really up for going through this guy's pre-game jitters routine. "You say you're nervous before each game and still manage to perform well, have some confidence in yourself."

"Don't be so cold-hearted. Fine, I'll leave you be. Diary is more fun to talk to anyway." He said before bouncing to the other side of the room, where a group of players were huddled over Paulinho's phone.

Ignoring him, I took a second to look back at these past few weeks, which had been quite hectic since our return from Poland. The past month played in my mind like a rapid-fire highlight reel, equal parts glory and frustration. Our return from Poland had been met with fanfare and pressure from fans and coaches alike.

The team had drawn once again in the match against Freiburg, leaving two valuable points on the table. The 1-1 frustrated everyone to no end, but Wirtz and I were just excited to be home and work on furthering our careers. Things started off well in my first game back, as, despite coming off the bench in the 70th minute against Lokomotiv Moscow, three days later in Russia, I continued my scoring spree.

The game ended in a 2:0 victory, securing our passage into the knockout stages with 7 points. Celebrations were short-lived as four days later came the next big challenge in Munich against league leaders Bayern. The match was the hardest I've played in my life so far, as Joshua Kimmich kept me silent for almost 80 minutes.

He followed me better than my own shadow, limiting my impact during attacks, and forcing me to focus more on possession and ball retention play. Luckily, my team pulled through, managing to keep the game close at 1:1 all the way till the 85th minute. I finally got my chance, the left edge of the box against a tired Joshua Kimmich, whose reaction speed had slowed.

A swift step over mixed with a feint, and I was moving to the D of the box. Jérôme Boateng came to meet me, but I had already decided to pull the trigger. I still remember the feeling of my boots skimming the pitch, the rhythm of the crowd, and the disbelief on Neuer's face when my curling strike found the bottom corner to seal a 2:1 win. That was a moment I would never forget as I had managed to beat yet another legendary keep of the past decade.

Confidence surged through the squad after that. Back-to-back wins tend to do that. Schalke 04 came next. We hosted them on December 7th, and while they fought hard, our intensity was sharper. I didn't get on the scoresheet this time, but my assist to Amiri for the second goal was enough to steal a 2:1 victory.

We felt like the form we had at the start of the season was back and naturally felt invincible, but football has its way of humbling you. Just four days later, under the floodlights of the BayArena, Juventus reminded us that there's still a gap between us and Europe's elite. We were outplayed, outclassed, and ultimately had to accept a bitter 0:2 loss as the King spun back for revenge over our first leg clash in the group.

Ronaldo was simply out of this world during the game, scoring a header and a long-range attempt from outside the box. He had put Tah on the wrong foot following his turn and simply let loose a thunderous shot once he took aim. Maybe due to the fact that we were playing at home or the fact that they had won, but the Italian fans kept their 'competitive support' to themselves.

The only good takeaway from the match, personally, was getting a signed Real Madrid jersey from Ronaldo. Since I didn't accept his Juve jersey, in our last meeting, he had made it a personal mission to bring me one of his game-worn Madrid jerseys. I genuinely appreciated the present even after the loss, but that would be the last thing I could smile about for a while.

Then came Köln, our Local derby, and it was a packed house at RheinEnergieSTADION filled with 50,000 spectators. To make matters worse, the weather was almost torrential rain and wind that made me wish the game would be called off, but it was not meant to be. Absolutely nothing went right, from the first

whistle, it was a slugger fest with players jumping into tackles feet, shoulders and headfirsts like crash test dummies.

Have you ever tried controlling the ball under those conditions? Let me tell you it's almost impossible, as the moment you manage to deal with the weather, you have crazy players to deal with. By the first half an hour, I had become acquainted with the ground due to the number of rough tackles I had been on the wrong end of. I finally had enough after being sent to the ground by a two-foot tackle from two different Koln players that caught me in the air.

I had a few less-than-savoury choice words for the referee and the players that would have my mother glaring at me for days. Trust me, despite not being an African mum, she has mastered the art of letting your child know you're disappointed or in trouble with just a side-eye.

We eventually lost 0:2, and to make matters worse, I picked up a yellow card for dissent. In my opinion, it wasn't deserved since it did feel like we were playing against 12 men out there. Luckily coach saw fit to take me off before I could make things worse. My frustration had gotten the better of me, and I knew it, but I could only get kicked so many times before part of me wanted to try out some of those taekwondo techniques I used to practice.

Hertha BSC at home was supposed to be a bounce-back, a reset. But instead, we flatlined. A 0:1 loss, lifeless and bitter, marked our third straight defeat in all competitions. The fans were livid, understandably so, as their beloved team was failing to meet even the basic requirements. The press, well they did what they do best spin a story and stir as much shit as possible to sell clicks and papers.

That is why this game against Mainz 05 was so crucial, with it being the last game before we would go on Christmas break. Winning was the only option; otherwise, there could be a major reshuffling during the winter transfer season. "Alright, guys, gather up, it's time."

Chapter 484 484 Mainz 05

[21/12/2019 | Time: 15:28 | Location: MEWA Arena]

The players jogged into their respective formations under the brisk winter sky of MEWA Arena, boots crunching softly against the frosted grass as the final echoes of the national anthem faded into the air. The stadium buzzed with anticipation—fans wrapped in scarves clapped, chanted, and stomped as the tension of the last matchday before the winter break settled in.

"Welcome one and all to a chilly but electric MEWA Arena here in Mainz, where Match week 17 concludes with what promises to be a compelling encounter between Mainz 05 and Bayer Leverkusen. I'm Derek Rae, joined in the commentary booth as always by Stewart Robson." He stated as his by-now iconic voice resounded through the live broadcast, instantly capturing everyone's attention.

"Thanks, Derek. Leverkusen has had a rollercoaster past few weeks — highs like that phenomenal win over Bayern and lows like the collapse against Hertha. But today is crucial. A win could re-stabilise their trajectory heading into the winter break." Stewart Robson said as he did his job of keeping the conversation flowing.

"Let's take a look at the lineups, starting with the home side, Mainz 05, lining up in a 4-2-3-1," Derek stated as the Mainz starting lineup appeared on the screen with corresponding pictures for the viewer's visual ease.

Mainz 05 Starting XI (4-2-3-1)

GK: Robin Zentner

RB: Ridle Baku

CB: Moussa Niakhaté

CB: Jeremiah St. Juste

LB: Aarón Martín

CDM: Pierre Kunde

CDM: Edimilson Fernandes

RM: Levin Öztunali

CAM: Jean-Paul Boëtius

LM: Karim Onisiwo

ST: Robin Quaison

"Robin Quaison leads the line, and Boëtius just behind him is one to watch — tricky on the ball and sharp with his final pass." Stewart Robson analysed, sounding genuinely intrigued by his conjecture, prompting the viewers to follow that same line of thinking.

Derek Rae didn't delve deeper into analysing the Mainz squad and directly moved on to the visiting side. "Now let's shift over to Bayer Leverkusen. They're in a 4-1-4-1 today — a setup that gives them great fluidity in transition and control in midfield. A mix of youth and experience."

Bayer Leverkusen Starting XI (4-1-4-1)

GK: Lukas Hradecky (Captain)

RB: Mitchell Weiser

CB: Jonathan Tah

CB: Sven Bender

LB: Wendell

CDM: Charles Aránguiz

RM: Leon Bailey

RCM: Kerem Demirbay

LCM: Florian Wirtz

LM: Rakim Rex

ST: Kevin Volland

Bench: Ramazan Ozcan, Daley Sinkgraven, Aleksandar Dragovic, Exequiel Palacios, Paulinho, Moussa Diaby, Lucas Alario, Kai Havertz, Nadiem Amiri.

"Rakim Rex gets the nod again on the left, fresh from his heroics in Poland, while the ever-dangerous Leon Bailey starts wide right. But keep your eyes on young Florian Wirtz," Stewart Robson added with a knowing tone. "This is his first Bundesliga start, and what a platform to make a name for himself."

"And Charles Aránguiz as the lone holding midfielder," Derek Rae continued, "tasked with anchoring the side and giving those attacking talents ahead of him the freedom to roam."

The two commentators continued analysing how each player on paper could impact the match, but down below, the captains had finished their coin toss. Volland won the toss and decided to attack from left to right, shooting into the goal in front of the Mainz home stand. Shortly, today's referee, Hanz Muller, stepped just outside the centre circle and went through his mandatory checks with the keepers and other officials.

(FWEEEEt!) "There you have it, folks, the match is on the way with a Mainz kick-off," Derek Rae stated, closely followed by Robin Quaison knocking the ball into his own half.

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The opening exchanges were tight, as expected. Mainz pressed aggressively in their 4-2-3-1 shape, trying to disrupt Leverkusen's rhythm early. Öztunali and Onisiwo pushed high, harrying Wendell and Weiser on the flanks, while Pierre Kunde tracked Wirtz like a bloodhound through the middle. The Leverkusen youngster had made a name for himself throughout the league for his effectiveness in linking up play and creating scoring chances.

But Leverkusen remained composed. With Aránguiz commanding the midfield with ice-cold efficiency, he operated like a metronome just in front of the defence, calmly redirecting pressure and linking play with short, calculated passes. No matter how the Mainz midfielders or defenders tried to link up with Robin Quaison, he was there to break it up.

"Charles Aránguiz doing what he does best," Robson noted. "Simple passes, smart positioning, nothing too extravagant, he's the glue in that midfield."

[7]

By the 7th minute, Leverkusen began asserting themselves. A flowing sequence from the back — Tah to Demirbay, who split the lines with a pass into Rakim's feet. He took one touch to bring the ball under his control, another to beat Riddle Baku to the inside after selling a feint inward.

"Rex, gliding like silk!" Derek Rae exclaimed.

He quickly sped down the flank, crossing into the final third as Baku caught up to him. The Mainz right-back made a move to get into his path, but Rakim reacted almost instantly, coming to a quick stop. He cut in on his right, ignored Wirtz's darting overlap, and cracked a curling effort toward the far post.

"Robin Zentneeeerrrr!" Rae shouted in excitement as Zentner sprang into the air, fully stretched out as he managed to do just enough to tip it wide for a corner. The Leverkusen fans roared in excitement at what was to come, cheering their boys on as they prepared for the corner.

From the resulting corner, Demirbay whipped it to the edge of the six-yard box. Sven Bender rose, but it deflected awkwardly off St. Juste and bounced to Bailey at the back post. "Leon Bailey shoots... of he's blocked by Aarón Martín!" shouted Robson. "That's a brave intervention!"

[15]

Mainz tried to respond, and they managed to get their first real chance in the 15th minute. Fernandes intercepted a lazy pass from Wirtz that was meant for Rakim out wide. Fernandes didn't dawdle, and unlike Wirtz, his pass moved with purpose and power, launching a quick break. Boëtius collected it centrally, skipped past Aránguiz, and threaded a pass through to Quaison.

He went shoulder-to-shoulder with Tah as he turned with the ball's momentum, managing to unleash a low strike across the goal. "Quaison! Oooh, not far wide!" Rae's voice lifted with tension. Hradecky dove but let it roll past the far post, knowing it had curled outside by inches.

That moment snapped Leverkusen back into action as the tempo of the game continued to accelerate. Wirtz began to find his rhythm despite his new bodyguard by drifting into pockets of space between the lines, linking cleverly with Volland, who dropped deep to disrupt the Mainz centre-backs' shape.

[23]

Then, in the 23rd minute, the breakthrough came after Aránguiz won the ball cleanly with a ruthless slide tackle just outside the Leverkusen box that sent Karim Onisiwo tumbling to the ground. Not holding onto the ball, he played a sharp ball to Wirtz, who flicked it first time to Demirbay. The midfielder nudged the ball down and drove forward, carrying it 30 yards up the pitch before sliding it out wide to Bailey as they entered the final third.



Bailey hesitated, feinting a cut backwards only to dart past Aarón Martín with a burst of pace, before squaring the ball into the box. "Kevin Volland!!!" Derek Rae roared as the striker wrestled with both central defenders, bursting into the box. To everyone's surprise, the striker skipped over the ball, letting it slip through the open legs of Moussa Niakhaté and curving out to the right side of the box.

Baku, who had been racing ahead of Rakim, was forced to turn on his axis in an attempt to interfere with the clinical winger. Especially with his goal conversion rate being as high as 60% inside the box, as 9/10's he would choose to shoot even if there is a better option open. His greed for goals is probably one of the major faults in his game, since as long as he feels like he can beat a man to score, he will take his chances.

This just happened to be that 1 time he did not try to beat his man and go for the goal as he deftly stopped the ball with his left foot. In that same motion, he pulled it behind his right foot and swept it across, sending the ball skidding to the edge of the box. Wirtz, who had been racing ahead since initiating the attack, now found the ball rolling his way unmarked with the nearest defender more than 2 meters from him.

Chapter 485 485 Mainz 05 (2)

[24]

Wirtz didn't hesitate as he took one touch to steady the ball, and his next touch struck the ball. (THUMP!) A thunderbolt off his right boot, a crisp and clean connection as the ball blazed low and hard through a forest of legs. The Centre backs who had seconds ago tussled with Kevin tried to deflect it, but almost as if the ball had been lubricated with Uncle Tom's elbow grease, it slipped past all of them.

"Florian Wirtz!!!" Derek Rae's voice hit another octave as Zentner dove to his right, but it was too late. "GOOOOOAL!" The travelling Leverkusen fans roared upon seeing the net bulge. They exclaimed at the top of their lungs, letting their joy be heard by anyone within earshot, causing their section to slightly tremble.

"What a finish! What a moment! On his very first Bundesliga start, the teenager fires Leverkusen ahead with a rocket!" Stewart Robson couldn't contain his admiration, but Wirtz couldn't care less as he raced to the corner flag.

Despite the angry home fans just behind the corner flag doing their best to glare a hole into his brain, the teenager did not care in the least. He made a caption motion with the index and thumb fingers on both hands as he sent a cheeky smile into the camera. Moments later, he was surrounded by the rest of his teammates sharing in his joy as he recorded his 3 Bundesliga goal.

[27]

As play resumed, Leverkusen's confidence surged, much to the delight of their fans who could tell the difference. They could feel it in the way the players demanded the ball from each other, becoming more vocal. Everyone seemed to want to get involved in the match, trying their best to affect it positively.

Both Rakim and Bailey started drifting inside more, looking for pockets to exploit as they connected with the passing game of their teammates. Even Wendell and Weiser started pushing higher, their overlapping runs turning Mainz's wide men into part-time fullbacks. Forcing the attack-minded wingers to track back into defensive areas quickly created chaos for their opponents.

[32]

In the 32nd minute, after exploiting a clever overlap on the right flank that forced Karim Onisiwo to chase after the blistering Mitchell Weiser. The winger had speed on his side, but a clever nudge by Mitchell quickly sent him off balance, causing him to become intimate with the ground. The right-back didn't look back and immediately sent a curving cross into the box the moment he reached the side of the box.

The ball curled in with menace, bending away from the keeper and toward the penalty spot. Volland attacked it like a freight train, timing his leap to perfection between St. Juste and Niakhaté. His forehead met the ball with a CRACK, and the sound echoed through the MEWA Arena as if someone had fired a starter's pistol.

"Volland with the header!" Derek Rae shouted.

The effort was powerful, downward, textbook. Zentner was flat-footed for a split second—but that second saved him. He dropped to his knees and got just enough glove to it, the ball ricocheting back out into the crowded six-yard box. Chaos ensued but Demirbay was first to react, poking the rebound goalward again, but this time it smashed into the thigh of Aarón Martín who performed a diving save on the line.

The ball deflected up into the air, spinning, still alive as it dropped. Rakim came storming in, eyes locked onto the ball as his body coiled ready to pounce, only for Ridle Baku to leap into the air and head the ball to clear it away. "That's heroic defending from Baku!" Stewart Robson exclaimed. "Rex was lining that up like it was a Finish Him moment in Mortal Kombat,"

"Hahaha, talk about a blast from the past, Mainz will have to step it up or this could quickly become a one-sided proceeding." Derek Rae intoned as Charles Aránguiz won the loose ball from the feet of Pierre Kunde at the edge of the final third. The holding midfielder did not hesitate as he dribbled forward a couple of steps and unleashed a long-range rocket.

"That is one he will want back," Robson commented as the ball flew off into the stands like a shooting star hitting a poor Mainz fan on the head. "Maybe he slipped, or was simply too eager to let the shot off? Either way, there is no excuse for such poor execution for a player of his calibre."

"You know, as they say, you miss all the shots you don't take, but that is definitely a shot he will quickly want to forget," Rae commented in a light-hearted tone as the midfielder can be seen shaking his head with a frustrated smile. "Peter Bosz will have some questions for him at halftime, considering the variety of passing options that were available to him.

[36]

Mainz, breathing a sigh of relief after surviving a furious five-minute Leverkusen onslaught, tried to settle back into the game. Their captain, Moussa Niakhaté, barked instructions from the back, urging his midfielders to tighten the gaps and maintain composure. Jean-Paul Boëtius, who had been fairly quiet since the opening ten minutes, began dropping deeper, trying to pull strings and shake off Aránguiz's suffocating presence.

It showed an immediate effect in the 37th minute, they finally pieced something together. Edimilson Fernandes stepped in to intercept a pass from Wirtz and immediately laid it off to Pierre Kunde, who this time didn't dawdle. Kunde sent a piercing diagonal ball into the stride of Karim Onisiwo on the left. The winger used his body well to fend off Weiser, cut inside and fizzed a dangerous ball across the face of goal.

"That's more like it from Mainz!" Rae noted with surprise. "A purposeful ball across the danger zone, but no one's there to meet it." Robin Quaison had made a run, but it was a second too late, a half-moment of hesitation that kept the score at 1–0, allowing Leverkusen to dodge the bullet.

[40]

Back down the other end, Rakim had just received a weighted pass up the line from Wendell and immediately decided to increase the pace. With a sharp drop of his shoulder, he sold Baku a dream,

bursting past him with a blinding first touch and a quick burst of acceleration that sent the Leverkusen fans into a frenzy.

"Rex turning on the afterburners!" Stewart Robson exclaimed as Rakim crossed the halfway line, ball glued to his feet, defenders rapidly backpedalling like they were caught in reverse. Boëtius lunged in with a stretched leg to slow him down — Rakim skipped past him with a nonchalant outside flick, barely breaking stride.

"Oh, my word... he might just go all the way," Derek Rae chimed in as Rakim's long stride continued to eat up good chunks of yardage.

St. Juste came out to meet him just past the 30-yard mark, doing just enough to slow his pace down, giving his teammates a chance to recover possession. Rakim didn't let him stick around for long, though a quick hem hem saw him drop a double step over causing the defender to lose balance. He tried to regain his balance by stretching out a leg to steal the ball, but it was a second too late.

A nimble but quick Elastico saw Rakim slot the ball through his open legs as he exited the field with a burst of acceleration, reaching the ball just before it could go out. "And he is off to the races," Robson exclaimed as Rakim cut inwards, stepping across St Juste's turning path and forcing him to slow down.

Gasps echoed around the stadium as Rakim entered the final third with options available to him. Volland had cut across to his left, Bailey surged on the far side with blistering speed, but he kept going, narrowing the angle, dragging Niakhaté with him toward the edge of the box.

Niakhaté squared his stance, ready to block whatever Rakim had planned—but the winger merely made a staggered hesitation before sending a diagonal through ball towards the far post. "Leon Baileeeeeeey!" Rae exclaimed as the winger who had been locked in a foot race with the Mainz left back slid forward feet first.

Using his momentum to sweep into the cross, Bailey connected sweetly with the ball, his outstretched right foot redirecting it toward the roof of the net. "BOOM!" Zentner, already scrambling across his line, jumped into action and flew towards the left side, but the angle of the shot was too sharp. He managed to get a fingertip to it, but the contact wasn't enough, and the ball kissed the inside of the post.

"IT'S IN!" Derek Rae shouted. "BAILEY MAKES IT TWO." The Leverkusen players quickly swarmed Bailey, whose joy could no longer be contained, as he ended his five-game goal drought. The fans let him feel their love by loudly cheering and haphazardly spilling their expensive beers.

[Mainz 0 – 2 Leverkusen]

Chapter 486 486 Mainz 05 (3)

[21/12/2019 | Time: 16:15 | Location: MEWA Arena | Mainz 0 – 2 Leverkusen]

The first half ended in a convincing 0 - 2 for Leverkusen as neither team managed to mount a worthwhile attack in the dying minutes of the first half. But the visitors were not too bothered, simply singing their club hymns to their heart's content. The past 3 games have been rough for them, so seeing their team react positively despite the setback brought joy to their faces.

"Ben Christmas came early this year." Finn, a man in his mid-thirties and a third-generation Leverkusen fan, said in a jovial tone before proceeding to hug his mug of beer. "Those youngsters are making the money we spent on season tickets worthwhile."

"Hahah, yeah, they definitely gave us a big present, and if they continue at this pace, this might turn into a complete rout," Ben responded with a bright smile before digging into his Currywurst and pommes.

"After Charles' wild bombardment, I was ready to witness another rocky performance from the midfield, but he has been solid since."

"Have you been reading war novels again? For the last time, just because you read it in fanfiction doesn't make you qualified to lead men into battle." Finn exasperatedly commented as he eyed his shorter and slightly chubby friend who fancied himself as a modern-day Napoleon. "But bombardment is definitely the right word for that balled, Mainz B\*st\*rd, who got smacked on the dome."

"How would you know? Let me tell you I'm a distant descendant of Alexander the Great," Ben quickly retorted with indignation.

"Distant being the keyword, a hundred-plus generations down the line are no longer part of the same family, why else do you think those royalties f\*£k their cousins and act like it's a noble thing." Finn retorted, shutting his friend up with his crude but mostly accurate argument that forced the latter to really consider his lineage.

"Duck that! I thought we were talking about the team and not about the world's most glorified incest practices." Ben quickly retorted with a huff, stabbing his wooden fork to stab another piece of bratwurst coated in warm curry ketchup sauce. Smiling at the delightful taste of the food, he momentarily forgot his train of thought. "It's a shame that they will be going into a break just as they are finding their momentum."

(cough cough cough) Finn choked on his beer at his friend's sudden outburst that bordered on bipolar. However, since he was already used to his friend's actions, he quickly brushed it aside. "It's indeed a shame, especially since this is the strongest frontline we've had in years."

"I've been saying that our midfield is the problem since the start of the season. Peter is too indecisive, mixing and matching the midfield core like a game of connect five." Ben huffed in annoyance. "Even

when we were winning, most of the goals came from the wingbacks linking up with the wingers and attackers. The only time the midfield performed well was when one of the midfielders had a breakout game, controlling the game with solo heroics."

"I guess that's what happens when you are spoiled for choice's and it's not like he can play Kai in all games." Finn intoned, having also been forced to come to this realisation after the string of shaky performances following Rakim's excursion to Poland. Having lost one of their most clinical goal-creating players, the pressure on the midfield became that much more glaring, highlighting their faults. "You don't think it's the tactics, right? We have been dominant whenever we field our best team, working well, even with just one or two substitutions."

"I think it might be his tactical adjustment to certain players, for example, Julian Baumgartlinger, he is a German war machine who would excel in a more physical game rather than our usual pressing and zonal marking," Ben said in a serious tone, nodding his head sagely as he continued to analyse a few other players' tendencies and the best playstyle for them.

"Have you been reading football novels again? You know you're not 'The Special One', right?" Finn unceremoniously interrupted his friend, causing an awkward atmosphere to permeate.

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[21/12/2019 | Time: 16:30 | Location: MEWA Arena | Mainz 0 – 2 Leverkusen]

[45]

(Fweet)

With the referee's whistle, the second half commenced with a Leverkusen kick-off as the fans who had headed to the concessions stand returned to their seats. "And we're back for another half of what promises to be an exciting period of football."

"Indeed, Derek, this match promises to be a goal feast no matter which side decides to take control of the match," Robson commented with excitement as the red lions surged forward from the first moment to launch an attack.

Rakim, still burning with momentum from the first half, immediately darted inside from the left after receiving a smart ball from Wendell. He played a quick one-two with Demirbay at the top of the box before unleashing a curling effort from just outside the box. "Early warning shot from Rakim Rex!" Derek Rae exclaimed as the ball fizzed just wide of the far post, causing Zentner to stretch in vain.

"He's the type of player who is hard to stop once he gets hot and, unluckily for Mainz supporters, he his burning despite the freezing temperatures." Robson intoned with a light chuckle as Rakim could be seen staring at his boots in disappointment, almost as if blaming them for his miss.

[49]

Mainz seemed to have grown a backbone, or they simply woke up from their slumber as they started affecting the match, much to the delight of their fans. A long goal-kick from Zentner found its way to substitute Danny Latza, who chested it down graciously. Picking up the tempo, he sent a chipped through ball into the space behind the Leverkusen defence for Quaison to run onto.

The sudden change caught the Leverkusen back line off guard for a moment, and Quaison managed to bring it down on the turn. Quaison took a touch to his right, trying to create a shooting angle. Jonathan Tah recovered quickly, sliding across to block the strike, but the Swede managed to unleash a low, driven shot toward the near post.

"Quaison—on target!" Derek Rae's voice rose as the shot zipped toward the frame. Hradecky dropped fast, parrying the shot away with strong hands before Wendell came in to complete the clearance.

"That was more like it from Mainz," Stewart Robson noted. "You get the sense the next goal is absolutely crucial by how much both teams want this."

[54]

Leverkusen, sensing the shift in momentum, slowed the pace following frantic shouts from Peter Bosz on the sidelines. He motioned for Aranguiz and Demirbay to drop deeper and play shorter passes, recycling possession as they looked to draw Mainz out of shape. The wingers also dropped deeper to receive and link play, drawing fouls as the home side got more aggressive.

Seeing the lack of effectiveness for Wirtz in this slower-moving tempo, Peter Bosz sent for Exequiel Palacios alongside Moussa Diaby to warm up. A few minutes later, he proceeded with the substitution when a pass with too much power skipped off the pitch.

Bayer Leverkusen: OFF - Florian Wirtz & Leon Bailey | ON - Exequiel Palacios & Moussa Diaby

Mainz 05: OFF - Pierre Kunde | ON - Leandro Barreiro

The substitutions injected fresh energy into the match. Diaby, with his low centre of gravity and electric pace, immediately gave Aarón Martín trouble down the right. His legs seemed restless as he could be seen everywhere momentarily putting the right flank on lock. Meanwhile, Palacios brought a more measured control to the midfield, helping Aránguiz settle after a physically intense first half.

[60]

Barreiro only had a few minutes to settle on the pitch, but he made full use of the few touches he got. He pinched the ball off Demirbay near the centre circle with surprising ease and surged forward. Spotting Onisiwo peeling away from Weiser, Barreiro slipped a precise pass into the channel. Onisiwo took it in stride, cut onto his right, and let fly from just inside the box.

"ONISIWO—IT'S CURLED!"

The strike arced viciously toward the top corner but shaved the outside of the post. This sent Hradecky's breath palpitating as he had remained rooted on his spot, unable to react quickly enough. But he also knew that even if he had reacted to jump, he wouldn't have gotten there even if he stretched to the fullest.

"Ohh, that's close! That would've brought the house down here at the MEWA," Derek Rae exclaimed.

Chapter 487 487 Mainz 05 (4)

The close call sparked a bolt of urgency in both teams, the home team more so, as they trailed by two goals. Mainz fans rose to their feet, singing their chants from the top of their lungs, trying to will their team back into the game. For a few minutes, their energy translated into action on the pitch. Barreiro, now buzzing with confidence, played a clever give-and-go with Boëtius on the left before crossing deep into the box.

Quaison read the delivery well, timing his run between the Leverkusen centre-backs. He rose above Tah and got a firm connection, heading the ball downward with purpose. "HERE COMES QUAISON!" shouted Rae, followed by the thunderous cheers of almost 40,000 Mainz fans as the ball bounced off the turf and slipped past Hradecky's outstretched arms.

"GOOOAAAAAL! ROBIN QUAISON BRINGS MAINZ BACK INTO IT!" Stewart Robson bellowed as the net rippled, and the stadium erupted in a frenzy. Fans jumped up and down, shouting in celebration as the forward sprinted toward the corner flag, pumping both fists while his teammates mobbed him.

"This place has come alive again!" Derek Rae added with urgency. "That was a towering header—textbook execution from the forward. Mainz are back in the contest with just over twenty-five minutes to play!"

The MEWA Arena continued to quake with the rhythmic stomping of thousands of boots as flares popped in the home end illuminated by red smoke, which briefly swirled into the air. Peter Bosz, in the away coaching area, animatedly clapped his hands, urging his men to refocus on the mission.

The Leverkusen players regrouped quickly after the restart, their composure slowly returning. Aránguiz and Palacios exchanged short passes around the midfield area, playing keep away with the ball as the Mainz players chased. They did this with a sense of urgency, doing their best to defuse Mainz's sudden burst of intensity.

"Leverkusen needs to quickly take control of this match, or all their hard work could be for nothing," Robson said analytically. "Mainz have the wind in their sails, and a second goal would completely change this game."

Robson's words proved true as the home team started playing further up the field. Forming little triangles or squares to create a situation where they could overload their opponents, they pressured Wendell into booting the ball upfield. Moussa Niakhaté raced shoulder to shoulder with Kevin Volland to the ball's landing point, doing everything right.

Using his broad frame to keep Volland on the back foot, he confidently nodded the ball towards Zentner in the box. The Mainz players quickly retreated into their own half the moment they regained possession of the ball. A much more mellowed, slowed-down passing game ensued as they comfortably worked the ball across the halfway line.

[68]

The moment they did newly brought on Leandro Barreiro flipped a switch as soon as he got hold of the ball. He deftly spun past Exequiel Palacios in midfield and let loose a defence-splitting through ball that sliced past the entirety of the Leverkusen players. "QUAISON!" Rae exclaimed as the Mainz striker latched onto the ball just as he stepped into the box.

Due to the angles of his run and the pass, he was dragged wide a bit shy of the left post. Hradecky came charging out with both arms spread wide, restricting the angle just as the striker turned to face him. Quaison kept his cool as he eyed the rapidly approaching Hradecky. A subtle feint to his left forced the keeper to adjust, as he shifted the ball onto his right foot, buying himself an extra half-yard.

Hradecky hesitated slightly before committing to the lunge, but the Mainz forward had already swung his foot. With the subtlest of touches, his right foot scooped up the ball, sending it looping high above the keeper. Time seemed to slow down in that moment as Hradecky tried to raise his hand in futility, as he couldn't even grasp the seams of the ball.

The stadium, which had been holding its breath, rose to its feet as they watched the ball descend towards the far post. The goal seemed inevitable, but a figure dressed in the black number four jersey appeared. "Jonathan Tah to the rescue!" Robson exclaimed as Tah's long legs smacked the ball that seemed to almost float in slow motion.

"Another day in the office for Jonathan Tah as he keeps Leverkusen in the lead." Rae intoned with a huge grin as he watched Charles Aránguiz recycle the clearance at the edge of the box. "He is a name that has gone hugely unnoticed, but if he keeps making saves like that, this won't persist for long."

"His coaches will tell you that this is just normal for Tah, a defensive commander who is ready to put it on the line for his teammates," Robson added as Mitchell Weiser body-checked Karim Onisiwo of a hospital pass from Palacios meant for him. "I wouldn't be surprised if he becomes a mainstay in the national team given..."

"Moussa Diaby is on the move down the right flank, and it's looking dangerous." Rae interrupted as the Frenchman feinted a cut inward at the halfway line, only to knock the ball down the line. Hugging the byline, he exploded past Aarón Martín with blistering pace, latching onto the ball a moment later.

His boots dug into the turf, eating up valuable yardage quickly entering the final third as Martín and nearby Mainz defenders scrambled to recover. Diaby lifted his head as he reached the corner of the box, spotting Volland making a darting near-post run and Rakim charging toward the far post. With pinpoint precision, the winger whipped in a sharp, driven cross.

"DIABY WITH A LOW CROSS—!" Rae's voice heightened as Volland lunged forward at full stretch, attempting to direct the ball goalward.

But Moussa Niakhaté was more alert in lunging forward, somehow intercepting it just inches ahead of Alario's boot, sending the ball spiralling into the air. The ball spun upward awkwardly, dropping dangerously at the edge of Mainz's box. Players from both sides converged rapidly, eyes fixed skyward. It was Charles Aránguiz who reacted first, reading the ball's trajectory and unleashing a thunderous volley from 20 yards out.

"ARÁNGUIZ WITH A VOLLEY—!" Rae's voice rang out in anticipation.

The shot ripped through the air, sizzling with menace as it arrowed towards the bottom corner. Zentner, caught briefly flat-footed, launched himself instinctively to his right, stretching every inch of his frame. The entire MEWA Arena seemed to pause in a collective intake of breath.

"WHAT A SAVE BY ZENTNER!" Robson roared as the Mainz keeper's fingertips brushed the ball, diverting it inches past the upright. The stadium burst into applause, acknowledging the brilliance of their number one.

[75]

From the ensuing corner, Palacios swung in a curling delivery that tested Mainz's resolve. Sven Bender rose powerfully, delivering a header towards goal, but the angle wasn't dangerous enough, allowing Zentner to comfortably collect it in his arms. Mainz rapidly transitioned to attack mode, with Zentner sprinting to the edge of his box to launch a throw down the right flank.

[77]

Ridle Baku controlled the throw expertly, swiftly pivoting to shield the ball from Wendell's pressing challenge. With Mainz supporters urging him forward, Baku surged ahead and threaded an incisive pass into Barreiro, who deftly flicked it on towards the overlapping run of Aarón Martín.

"Aarón Martín breaking away down the left wing—Mainz really pushing now!" Rae called out, the excitement palpable in his voice. Martín raised his head, spotting Jean-Paul Boëtius and Karim Onisiwo darting into the Leverkusen final third amid retreating defenders.

Martín shaped his body expertly, whipping in a teasing cross with pace and precision. The ball swung dangerously toward the penalty spot, causing panic among the retreating Leverkusen players. Everyone seemed to have their hearts set on reaching that oh-so-tantalising cross first, but it was Hradecky who came out swinging that.

Almost taking Boëtius and Charles Aránguiz's head off in the process, he sent the ball rocketing out of his box. "Lukas Hradecky once again to the rescue, but it's not over yet," Robson exclaimed as they watched Levin Öztunalı Mainz's right winger, chase the ball down before it could go out for a throw-in.

Öztunali expertly cushioned the clearance with his chest, swiftly flicking it down to his right boot. Wendell, sensing the immediate danger, rushed to close him down, but Öztunali cleverly used his momentum against him, slipping the ball through his legs and leaving the left-back grasping at air.

"Öztunal is looking silky out there," moved a couple of yards from the defender. "He takes aim and shoots."

Since the keeper was still down from his earlier heroics, Öztunal took the shot from range. The ball fizzed off his Niki boot with venomous intent, slicing through the air like a missile as players from both sides watched in suspense. Hradecky scrambled desperately back toward his goal, eyes widening in panic.

"ÖZTUNALI WITH AN AUDACIOUS EFFORT—!" Derek Rae roared, voice rising in anticipation as the shot rocketed toward goal.

But at the very last moment, the ball dipped sharply, clattering off the top of the crossbar with an echoing CLANG!, sending reverberations through the MEWA Arena. "OHH, OFF THE CROSSBAR!" Stewart Robson shouted incredulously. "Öztunali was inches away from completing a spectacular Mainz comeback!"

Groans mixed with applause echoed from the Mainz faithful, who couldn't believe how close they had come. Öztunali placed his hands on his head, staring upwards in disbelief. Hradecky breathed a visible sigh of relief before turning around to rip his teammates a new one. No one dared to argue with the usually amiable keeper except for Tah, who urged his defensive line to tighten up the gaps.

Chapter 488 488 Slave Driver

[Location: Ravenscroft International Headquarters — Executive Boardroom, London Date: 21/12/2019 | Time: 17:45 GMT]

The late afternoon sun filtered through the towering glass windows of the Ravenscroft International headquarters, casting a golden hue on the polished mahogany boardroom table. The skyline of London shimmered just beyond the glass—an empire in perpetual motion. Inside, however, the air was stagnant with tension.

Seated at the head of the long table was Benedict Ravenscroft, the 6th Marquess of Alderwick and current head of the Ravenscroft family. Despite being the youngest in his generation, he proved himself worthy with his intellect and business acumen, winning the battle of succession. Despite being the head of the family, he only barely controls 52% of Ravenscroft Holdings, the parent company of their family empire.

That did not give him absolute power, though, as the holding company only owned about 40% of the total shares in the subsidiary business. For this reason, he puts extra emphasis on strengthening his main business due to the leverage it brings. Seated at the head of the long table, the rhythmic tapping of his fingers on the table subtly resounded as he listened to the directors.

Immaculately dressed in a tailored dark charcoal suit, he bore the sort of elegance that made everything around him feel several degrees cooler. His chiselled features remained unreadable, framed by neatly styled raven-black hair streaked ever so subtly with hints of silver. His gaze remained fixed on the sleek laptop in front of him, exuding a serious demeanour.

Unbeknownst to the other directors in the room, the screen didn't show graphs, quarterly revenue reports, or international market forecasts. It displayed the live post-match broadcast of the Bundesliga fixture between Mainz and Bayer Leverkusen. On the screen, Rakim and Jonathan Tah stood confidently in front of the press, sweat still glistening on their bodies as they answered the reporter's questions.

Standing behind Benedict, silent as a shadow, was his personal assistant, Lila Beaumont. Her sharp eyes noticed everything, but she did not interrupt him and watched over the rest of the directors.

"...which brings us to the issue of regional stagnation," said Charles Wren, one of the senior development executives, his voice confident yet measured. "The expansion into the South Korean and Canadian urban hotel markets has been serviceable but not transformative. Margins are tight, our guest retention has been slipping all year, and let's be honest—our aesthetic isn't resonating with the newer generation of high-spending travellers."

There were nods around the table as this had been a growing concern in the high-end hotel business. New money clients would rather book a villa for themselves and their entourage to show off than book a hotel. Traditional Hotel and hospitality businesses were being phased out unless they had historical value or some kind of draw that made them attractive.

Charles tapped his finger on a pie chart displayed on the monitor behind him. "We need a pivot. Not just in operations or design, but in brand identity. Which brings me to a potential synergy opportunity—" He hesitated just a second too long, considering whether his words were worth the potential backlash.

"—With our cosmetic group," he said. "Namely, a flagship crossover initiative. Luxury wellness floors in select hotels. Spa suites infused with the Eden Grace branding." Another pause. "If we were to go ahead with this Idea, it would make sense to begin discussions with their chairman, given that their recently launched cosmetic products have failed to gain traction in the market."

A hush fell over the boardroom, similar to the silence that occurs before the sudden drop in air pressure before a storm. Every executive at the table stiffened, some exchanging glances from the corners of their eyes. A few pretended to study the digital notepad before them, while others looked distinctly uncomfortable. The unspoken name behind the "cosmetic group" was common knowledge: Eden Grace was run by none other than Lady Eleanor Ravenscroft.

Benedict didn't respond right away. He let the silence steep in the oak-panelled room, amplifying the discomfort with each passing second. From his position at the head of the table, his green eyes finally

flicked upward from the laptop screen and locked directly onto Charles Wren. The tapping of his fingers ceased. The change was imperceptible, yet absolute.

"Interesting," Benedict murmured, his voice low and calm, but carrying weight that made all their spines straighten. He closed the laptop gently, with the finality of a guillotine blade, and folded his hands before him.

"Let me ensure I've heard you correctly, Mr Wren," he continued, his tone now cool and clipped like fine ice being cracked under pressure. "You're proposing that we pivot our hospitality division—currently the host of several heads of state, three royal weddings, and a not inconsiderable number of Fortune 500 board meetings—toward a crossover initiative with... Eden Grace?"

A few of the junior executives subtly adjusted their posture, sensing the air chill by several degrees. Wren hesitated too long to the point the other executives almost suffocated in the pressure Benedict was exuding. "Yes, Chairman strategically, it would integrate well with the rise of experiential luxury. Wellness tourism is on an upward trend and—"

"—And you believe this integration is best initiated under the assumption that Eden Grace is in a position to deliver." Benedict interrupted, steepling his fingers. "Even though their latest product launch was underwhelming. Despite a 13% quarter-on-quarter drop in retail penetration. Despite public misgivings over their rebranding."

Wren swallowed hard, knowing little about the family's power struggle and that his suggestion might be taken the wrong way. However, he cared for none of that, given that some of his own money was tied to the success of the conglomerate, and money was the only king he rode to battle for.

Benedict wasn't finished as he leaned forward on the table, intertwining his fingers as his elbow rested on the table. "Let us not pretend," he continued, voice now low and unmistakably chill, "that my sister

Eleanor's ambitions for Eden Grace are unaligned with her broader aspirations for this family. To entertain such a merger would be to feed the very mechanism she hopes to use to challenge my position."

Silence hung in the room, with no one daring to breathe loudly, let alone say something. Wren, who was on the receiving end of his emerald stare, felt beads of sweat begin to form on his forehead. "Though your idea is misguided, it is along the right track. Mr Brent, have the action team create a modernisation plan for all of our major hotels. The Continental in New York will act as the pilot, and Mrs Brooks has the marketing department compile a list of influencers, athletes, and celebrities for long, medium and short-term brand ambassador deals."

"Mr Wren, you will be going to Japan to oversee our R&D department there. Identify useful applications and inventions that we can roll out in the next 5 years." Benedict stood up from his throne-like chair, Lila Beaumont immediately moving to pack up his laptop and any important folder on the table. "Since you care so much about our bottom line, you will have a preliminary report ready for me by New Year's Day, along with a comprehensive cost report for its implementation in all 15 of our flagship hotels around the world."

His words were final as he picked up his suit coat, which hung on a designated stand. Not even bothering to see if they had accepted his order, he headed for the door with Lila in tow. She nodded her head in apology for her boss's actions before firmly shutting the door behind them.

"Fuck you just had to provoke that slave driver, now he is going to have us work all throughout the holidays." a well-dressed executive lamented with a wry smile as he rubbed his temples. "Knowing his mood swing, I wouldn't be surprised if he has us do a year's worth of work before easter."

"Oh, come on, Martin, we all know something had to be done. You might have enough money to not care about losing a few million each year, but I'm too greedy for my own good," Wren retorted with a tight smile as he proceeded to pack up his documents. "Plus, don't me you all don't miss the days when old chairman David was in power, all our business were aligned centrally, streamlining operations and maximising profits."

Silence hung in the room as all the executives took a moment to lament the current situation, which had persisted for four years. Ever since the battle for the patriarchal position ended in a pyrrhic victory for Lord Benedict, the subsidiary company's control by his sibling quickly uncoupled from central command. They became decentralised entities working for themselves and only doing the bare minimum they owed to the Ravenscroft holding group.

"(Sigh) Just hurry up to Tokyo so you can make it back for the annual New Year's party, from what I hear, many business elites from different conglomerates will be in attendance." Mrs Brooks stated as she stood up from her chair, already wondering how to lure the overworked marketing team out of their holiday to meet the demands of their overlord. "I hear that even the Rex family from Chelsea will be in attendance."

Chapter 489 Friendship

[Location: Düsseldorf International Airport — Arrivals Terminal | Date: 22/12/2019 | Time: 10:15 AM CET]

A crowd gathered at the arrival gates, bundled in winter coats and scarves, some holding signs, others craning their necks with anticipation. Among them stood Rakim Rex, casually dressed in a pair of jeans, a white off-cardigan turtleneck, and a jean jacket made by an Italian designer named Print. The Jacket was ripped on the elbows, a little on the shoulders, with a hand-stitched white tiger in the middle of climbing a waterfall.

The finishing touches on his look were the two rows of sterling silver necklaces that hung around his neck and a silver stainless steel Rolex. He leaned against a marble column; his gaze fixed on the glass doors that separated the arrivals from the rest of the world. Flashes from nearby phones occasionally lit up as a few travellers recognised him and whispered among themselves.

Some had even come up to him to ask for selfies and to sign a few things they managed to have on hand. He had come early out of habit, but now he regretted his decision since he didn't quite expect to

be this famous in Düsseldorf. Trying to remain composed, he turned up the music on his left airpod, a soft R&B track humming in his ears as he waited.

The beat thumped gently in his ears as Rakim exhaled through his nose, and he tried his best not to let the stray glances bother him too much. He didn't have to wait long as another group of passengers who had picked up their suitcases from the conveyor belt marched out of the glass door. He recognised her peach blonde curls in the mass of people, almost instantly, wheeling a matte black suitcase behind her.

She wore an oversized cream hoodie tucked into high-waisted Joggers with a matching pair of custom beige Air Forces. May's steps quickened the moment she spotted him, her dark green eyes lit up, and a wide smile appeared on her face. She immediately dropped her suitcase and practically jogged the rest of the way into Rakim's open arms.

He caught her effortlessly, lifting her as she wrapped her long legs around his waist and used her hands to wrap around his neck. Without a care for who was watching, she pressed her lips to his in a kiss that melted the hum of the airport into silence. Fireworks went off around them, and for 20 whole seconds, the world around them disappeared.

Her fingers brushed against the back of his neck, and when she finally pulled away, their foreheads lingered together. "Missed you," May whispered against his lips, her voice out of breath and soft.

"I know," he said, still holding her tight as the bright smile on his face widened. "I missed me, too."

May let out a snort and smacked his shoulder with the back of her hand. "You're impossible, you know that."

"And yet," Rakim said, gently lowering her to the ground, "you flew across the ocean just to see me."

"Can you even consider that little stretch of the North Sea between England, France the ocean?" May questioned, not really expecting an answer, considering that the two countries had managed to dig a tunnel connecting the island country to the mainland. "I mostly came for the hot showers and stocked minibar in your penthouse," she teased, brushing a curl behind her ear as she reached down for her suitcase.

"Hahaha, did my dear sister run out of apple juice or something, 'cause last time I checked, you don't drink alcohol?" Rakim retorted in question, but his hands wrapped around her slim waist subconsciously tightened in worry.

"Don't be silly, New Year's will be my 2 years sober mark, and I don't plan on slipping off the wagon anytime soon." She retorted with a gentle smile before promptly slapping his arms, forcing him to let go. Before Rakim could even respond to her words, an annoyed man's voice resounded, instantly capturing their attention.

"Whose fuckakter bag is this?!" A large, chubby man with a duffel bag slung over his shoulder and a fallen suitcase next to May's bags could be seen stopping his feet in rage. "People these days are too inconsiderate,"

Before he could turn a deeper shade of red that could well cause steam to escape from his ears, Rakim quickly sprinted before him. "We apologise, sir, we were just too excited upon meeting, we will pay if anything is broken."

The man huffed, clearly still irritated, but the sharp edge of his anger dulled slightly when he finally recognised who stood in front of him. His scowl softened into a blink of disbelief. "Wait a minute..."

You're Rakim, Finn is gonna lose his shit when he finds out," he said n excitement as he skilfully pulled out his phone and proceeded to face time the man in question.

Standing there in awkward silence, the 3 of them waited as the man's phone rang once, rang twice, rang thrice, and rang a fourth time. "Wtf Ben, I don't want to hear another one of your pigeon conspiracy theories. If the government has the time to send pigeon robots to watch your fat ass laze off at work, then they can dam well solve the self-inflicted refugee plague inflicting our country..."

The man named Finn, a fit-looking middle-aged man on the other end of the screen, continued on his rant, bringing up all kinds of topics. The man whom they now know as Ben could only stand there boiling over with rage, embarrassment and a multitude of emotions. His skin tone, which had been flushed in anger before, was now almost crimson with veins almost popping.

"Man, I don't even know how you managed to become the investment head at Deutsche Bank Cologne, given your character, oh, you're on FaceTime (huh)" Finn, who had his entire focus on his computer since answering the phone as he multitasked now sat frozen as he stared at the phone. "Your R'rakim... No way, no way, no way. You really are Rakim, I'd recognise those eyes even in a crowded bar fight,"

Finn's face quickly morphed into different shades of shock, disbelief, mistrust and finally acceptance. He adjusted his headset, the swivel chair beneath him squeaking as he sat upright. "Ben, you absolute cow—why didn't you say you ran into Rakim Rex of all people? Didn't we just watch their match against Mainz yesterday? What kind of horse shit luck do you have to run into him? Guess it's true what they say, what god doesn't give in looks, he makes up for it in other aspects."

"Oi, You Spanish puta did you just call me ugly?" Ben exclaimed loud enough to draw attention from nearby tourists and arrivals, not that he cared, though. "Everyone knows that the size of one's bank account adds fifty points to a man's looks. Considering my above-average looks and the size of my bank account, I might as well be 7 feet and a Hemsworth."

"You, a Hemsworth? Haha, that's the most preposterous thing you have said to date. What's next? You gonna tell me you are a distant Bezos?" Finn mercilessly retorted, not holding back any punches.
"Anyway, you met Rakim, that's cool, I guess."

"Let me tell you, my mum was born in Australia, so the likelihood of me being a Hemsworth is just as likely as the fact that Rakim Rex, our Leverkusen wunderkind, is standing in front of me." Ben retorted in a smug tone, causing Rakim to wonder how his being here was enough reason to back up the mans lies.

Rakim exchanged a quick glance with May, who looked a little tired, before finally speaking up. "You might want to have your mum's DNA tested before you start claiming Avengers royalties. Before that, let's solve our dispute., My girl just landed, and I need to feed her before she becomes a different person."

"Hahah, I get it, snickers," Finn burst out laughing from the screen, finding it way too funny that Rakim even started to rethink his career choice, only coming back to earth upon seeing May's unamused expression. "Ben, what are you doing giving those kids trouble? Just have him take a picture and sign an extra jersey for me, or don't bother sitting next to me at the next home game."

"Shut up, I was gonna do that anyway, would I still be holding them up if not for my need to show off in front of you?" Ben quickly complained, his words firing faster than a Gatling gun before directly ending the call. "Sorry about that, but his family has been Leverkusen fans since the club's inception, so I just had to share this moment with him."

"It's all good, I have met weirder fans you two are actually quite mellow compared to the crazy stans," Rakim commented with a slight hint of fear. "How about we go out to my car? I've got my training bag with my boots and game kit; I can sign for you and Finn."

"Hahah, that sounds good to me, let's go quickly," Ben excitedly exclaimed before bending down to pick up his fallen suitcase. Rakim did the same for May's suitcase and handbag, placing her fallen puma cap back on her head.

Ben wheezed slightly as he straightened up with his suitcase, his breath fogging up in the chill of the airport air. "Let's go, we are losing daylight."

Chapter 490 490 Because You're Bougie

[Location: Bundes autobahn 3 | Outside Düsseldorf | Date: 22/12/2019 | Time: 11:04 AM CET]

The mint green BMW i8 sliced through the crisp winter air, its low hum drowned beneath the howl of wind and the rapid whoosh of lanes disappearing beneath them. Snow-dusted trees blurred past on either side of the Autobahn as the car surged forward, needle flirting with 220 km/h.

Rakim had one hand resting lazily on the wheel, the other tapping along to the bass of an old-school Drake track echoing through the speakers. The heat was on just enough to keep the cabin warm, while the outside world lay frozen in shades of grey and white.

May reclined in the passenger seat, her legs covered by a thin blanket which was kept in the car, especially for her. A travel coffee mug from home was repurposed to carry her Starbucks order in her hands as she occasionally took a sip. Despite the car being warm, her body temperature liked to take its time to warm up, causing those around her to worry.

Luckily, the doctors had determined that there wasn't anything detrimental to her health before using medical jargon to explain why her body temperature tended to be lower than regular people. Her cheeks still carried a pink flush from the cold, and her eyes flicked between Rakim and the icy blur of the road ahead with a sense of peace. Seeing her so relaxed brought a smile to his face, feeling as if part of his family had returned to him.

"I forgot how stupid fast this thing was," she muttered, holding onto the door handle as the BMW zipped past a black Audi like it was parked. "Are we trying to break the sound barrier, or...?"

"Hey, it's not a thing, her name is Roxana.

Rakim grinned, sunglasses catching a gleam of winter sun. "Hey, it's not a thing, her name is Roxana, the most beautiful steed a man can ask for." He quickly retorted with a light pout, sending a pointed glance at her. "You said you were hungry. I'm just being a good boyfriend and getting you fed before the transformation begins."

May rolled her eyes. "The only thing transforming is my blood sugar. Slow down before we end up in the Fast & Furious: Cologne Drift."

He laughed, easing his foot off the pedal just enough to drop to a barely legal speed "Fine, fine, you know that no one likes a passenger driver, right?"

"Good thing you're in love with me then, otherwise we might have a serious problem." May retorted with a light huff before bringing her hand forward to turn up the music, which just happened to be playing Heart on Ice by Rod Wave.

Rakim raised a brow at the choice of song as Rod Wave's voice poured through the speakers. The raw emotion in the track clashed with the serenity of the snowy Autobahn, but somehow, it still fit. He smirked, glancing sideways in May, who had now taken off her shoes and was hugging her knees as she mouthed the lyrics. She swayed gently to the beat; blanket bundled around her like a cocoon.

"You sure you're not in your feels?" he teased, eyes darting between her and the road. "You know, most people play this after breakups, not reunions."

May shot him a side-eye over her mug. "Please. Just because I've got range doesn't mean I'm sad. It's called being emotionally cultured."

Rakim chuckled, tapping the wheel with the pads of his fingers. "Right, emotionally cultured. That's one way to explain why you still cry watching Toy Story."

"You really bringing Toy Story into this? Wow." She leaned her head against the seat and looked up at the ceiling dramatically. "That's a low blow, considering your eyes were also watery watching that film. I'm just more emotionally resilient, not heartless."

His head snapped her way so fast he felt a little whiplash, causing him to subconsciously ease up on the throttle. "They are toys... and they held hands." He tried to explain but could tell that she wasn't buying it.

"You've got a friend in me,

You've got troubles, I've got 'em too

There isn't anything I wouldn't do for you

We stick together, we can see it through

'Cause you've got a friend in me

Yeah, you've got a friend in me."

"I've never heard a toy or cartoon say something as profound as this (Sniff)" Rakim explained after an impromptu acapella performance of his favourite part of the movie's song.

"Are you crying?" she questioned, after taking a sip of her drink with theatrical poise, "I survived three Tube delays, a pigeon invasion at Camden Market, and a guy named Giles trying to convince me he's the reincarnation of David Bowie, but this takes the cake."

Rakim scoffed, dramatically wiping an imaginary tear from the corner of his eye with his thumb. "First of all, real men don't cry. We bleed translucent masculinity through our eyeballs when emotionally compromised."

May laughed so hard she nearly choked on her drink. "You leak masculinity? You sound like a busted radiator, my guy."

"That's just the sound of suppressed generational pain being turned into character development," he quipped, adjusting his grip on the steering wheel as the exit sign for Leverkusen flashed past overhead. "Besides, those toys were ready to face the incinerator together. That's loyalty, Brotherhood, and even the most ruthless man would shed a Daniel tear."

"Oh god, here comes the TED Talk, no matter how you wrap it up, I am not buying it," she groaned with a smile, leaning her head against the window as the soft glow of sunlight diffused through the frosted glass.

"Not even if it's TEDxRakim?" Rakim offered with a raised brow, his lips twitching at the corners.

"Not even if it came with a free emotional support squirrel," May muttered, but the way she smiled at him said she was thoroughly entertained.

They cruised off the main highway, the cityscape of Leverkusen gradually replacing the blur of pine-lined autobahn. Towering buildings glistened under the pale winter sun; their rooftops were dusted with snow. In a matter of moments, they had reached the familiar Hilton hotel where Rakim had been parked for half a year now.

"Seriously, how is it you haven't settled on a house, let alone an apartment, after all this time?" May asked as they pulled over to their designated parking spot.

"I've been waiting for you to make the final decision, plus the staff treats me well, so it's not on top of my list," Rakim shrugged as he moved to exit the door, already spotting a porter making his way to their car.

"You spend a fortune each month, and knowing how you tip, it's no wonder they treat you like a king." May retorted with a look of disdain, wondering how her usually acute boyfriend loosely managed his money. "Just be glad that your dad gives you a budget each month, otherwise, you would be living on the streets."

Rakim gave her a wounded look as he stepped out, the gullwing door rising dramatically beside him. "First of all," he said, rounding the car to open her door, "I could survive on charisma alone if it ever came down to it."

May arched a brow as she accepted his hand and slid out of the passenger seat. "Charisma won't pay for bottled water in Europe."

"Which is a crime, by the way," he muttered, grabbing her suitcase from the trunk just as the porter arrived with a respectful nod. "I still don't get why I have to pay for water that falls from the sky."

"Same reason you pay fifteen euros for artisanal avocado toast," May replied, brushing snowflakes off her hoodie. "Because you're bougie"