

## Football 501

Chapter 501 501 Back To Business

[Home Deluxe Arena, Paderborn, Germany | Date: 19/01/2020 | Time: 16:30]

The winter sun cast long shadows over the crisp turf of the Home Deluxe Arena, its modest stands buzzing with anticipation. A sea of blue and black shirts filled the 14,889 seats, scarves raised, and voices unified in chants as the kick-off approached. The clash between Paderborn and Bayer Leverkusen wasn't a title decider, but it carried the importance of how the second half of the season would unfold following the winter break.

The first half of this year's Bundesliga campaign has been a tightly contested six-horse race between. RB Leipzig led the standings with a respectable 37 points, closely followed by Borussia Mönchengladbach, which held onto 35 points. The third position is firmly held by Bayern with 33 points, 2 points above the fourth and fifth positions. Dortmund wins on goal difference through goal difference putting Schalke in 5th. Trailing in sixth position with 29 points, Bayern Leverkusen will hope to turn things around and at least clinch a Champions League spot at the end of the season.

High above the pitch, the commentary booth hummed to life as the red recording light blinked on. "Good evening, everyone," came the smooth, articulate voice of Derek Rae. "We're live from Paderborn for what promises to be a compelling Bundesliga encounter on Matchday 18. I'm Derek Rae, and joining me, as always, is former Arsenal and West Ham midfielder Stewart Robson."

Derek Rae's voice continued with composed energy, "We're just half an hour away from kick-off here at the Home Deluxe Arena, and while the temperatures might be hovering just above freezing, the atmosphere is nothing short of electric. Stewart, how do you see this one shaping up?"

"Well, Derek," Stewart Robson replied, eyes fixed on the pitch as players completed the last of their warm-ups. "Paderborn are a spirited side—aggressive pressing, dynamic in transitions—but as things stand, they are looking at relegation at this halfway point with barely 12 points on the board."

The camera panned across the narrow terraces of the Home Deluxe Arena, capturing bundled-up fans waving scarves and banners under the fading golden sky. The low hum of pre-match excitement reverberated through the ground, punctuated by the rhythmic beat of drums from the ultras section.

Stewart Robson continued, "They're sitting rock bottom, and they know time is running out. But they're not a side that goes quietly. Steffen Baumgart has instilled a real fighting spirit into this squad. Expect them to come out swinging."

Derek nodded in agreement, "And they'll have to. Because Bayer Leverkusen, on the other hand, have come back from the break looking to sharpen their title credentials. Rakim Rex is on the bench, and considering his personal controversy, I'm surprised that he is laced up at all. But with Diaby, Havertz, and Volland leading the line, they won't be short of attacking options."

Back on the pitch, both teams moved in their final warm-up drills. Leverkusen's passing carousel ticked fluidly in midfield, Baumgartlinger and Demirbay rotating calmly through the cones. Just beyond them, Kai Havertz exchanged a few light volleys with Diaby, who looked lightning-quick on his feet for the first time this season.

Meanwhile, Paderborn's players ran sprints in small groups, their coach barking short commands from the sidelines. "And Stewart," Derek chimed back in as graphics of both lineups appeared on screen, "talk us through Leverkusen's approach today. They're starting with that familiar 4-2-3-1. What's key for them if they want to break down this Paderborn side?"

"It all starts and ends with tempo," Stewart explained. "Baumgartlinger and Demirbay have to dictate the rhythm in midfield. If they're slow in transition, Paderborn's press will hurt them. But if they can move the ball quickly to Havertz between the lines and give Diaby space to isolate defenders, they could carve this game open early."

Both commentators continued breaking down both teams' line-ups, trying to figure out how the match would unfold. While they did this both side's players were ushered back into their dressing rooms for the final pre-match talks. It lasted no more than 10 minutes before both side's substitutes exited the tunnel and took their places on the bench.

With the final strains of "You'll Never Walk Alone" fading into the crisp winter air, the two teams emerged side by side, flanked by child mascots bundled in thick navy coats. Lars Bender, armband firm around his bicep, led Bayer Leverkusen out with quiet composure, while Sebastian Schonlau mirrored his counterpart with a clenched jaw and furrowed brow. The fans roared to life as the players took to the pitch, the sound rolling through the intimate confines of the Home Deluxe Arena like a wave.

Derek Rae spoke with the ceremonial reverence the moment demanded. "And there they are, Stewart. Leverkusen in their classic red-and-black stripes, and Paderborn in all blue. No matter where either side lies on the table, these are the kind of fixtures that define a team's mental steel after a long winter break."

"That's right, Derek," Stewart replied. "And for Leverkusen, this is the kind of match that can trip you up if you're complacent. But the presence of Volland, Diaby, and Havertz in that front line suggests they're here to stamp authority."

The players shook hands, the match officials standing ready—Felix Brych with a whistle in hand, flanked by his assistants on either side. The coin toss was quick. Schonlau won it, choosing to defend the end facing the main stand first. That meant Leverkusen would kick off, shooting toward the south end in the first half.

As the teams broke from the centre circle, Leverkusen took shape in their 4-2-3-1. Hrádecký bounced lightly on his heels between the posts, his breath visible in the air. Sinkgraven and Sven Bender slotted into fullback positions, while Tah and Lars Bender anchored the heart of the defence. In midfield, Baumgartlinger sat deeper than Demirbay, the Austrian barking early instructions with sharp hand signals. Ahead of them, Kai Havertz stood calmly at the edge of the centre circle, waiting for the whistle.

On his left and right, respectively, hugging the centre line, where Diaby is on the left and K. Bellarabi is on the right. Kevin Volland stretched his arms wide at the centre spot, exhaling slowly as he looked as he gazed at the Derbystar Brillant APS ball.

On the opposite side, Paderborn were tightly packed in their 4-2-2-2, with Srbeny and Michel buzzing along the front. Their wide midfielders, Pröger and Antwi-Adjei, hugged the touchlines, giving them a bit of width to exploit. (WHEEET) "And there's the whistle!" Derek Rae declared as Kevin nudged the ball back to Havertz, and the match was underway.

[1']

The first minute saw Leverkusen settle quickly into possession, with Jonathan Tah and Lars Bender exchanging touches across the backline before shifting it wide to Sven Bender. Baumgartlinger dropped in between them, calling for the ball to begin the buildup, while Diaby and Bellarabi held width on either flank.

Diaby was the first to spring into motion, darting down the left flank to receive a pass from Sinkgraven. He drew Dräger into a footrace and managed to keep the ball in play, slipping a low pass back into Demirbay near the edge of the box. But the Paderborn midfield collapsed quickly, with Gjasula arriving like a hammer to poke it free. The clearance was scrambled upfield by Schonlau, though it only reached Lars Bender near the halfway line.

Despite the failed attack, Leverkusen maintained their pressure. Jonathan Tah stepped into midfield to break a poor touch from Srbeny, then fed the ball to Havertz's feet with a crisp but weighty pass. Havertz turned gracefully, gliding past Vasiliadis and threading a pass into the path of Volland, who took one touch to steady himself—but Kilian was quick to close, making a vital sliding block just as Volland tried to pull the trigger from 25 yards out.

Chapter 502 502 vs Paderborn

[Home Deluxe Arena, Paderborn | 19/01/2020 | Game week 18 | Time: 17:10 | Minute: 10']

The game had settled into a rhythm, but tension still remained below the surface as both teams' fans chanted their player on. Paderborn in particular seemed to want to start of the new year with momentum as their high-energy 4-2-2-2 formation pressed in waves. Srbeny and Michel alternated who stepped forward to hurry Leverkusen's build-up play, while Vasiliadis and Gjasula plugged lanes.

The hunger to win this game was clearly present, earning bouts of applause at every successful tackle. They did not have the bulk of possession but each time they managed to win it they immediately charged forward in a Blitz Krieg like counter.

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Havertz received a short pass back from Volland near the halfway line, but before he could even receive it, the Albanian Gjasula was upon him. The young German forward nudged the ball with the outside of his boot, trying to turn away from danger. It was too late, though, as the season midfielder expertly moved his body between the ball and the player.

Using his body to hold off Havertz's, he took control of the ball, and in the next moment, he sent a weighted ball towards the right flank into the path of Pröger. The Paderborn right mid deftly took hold

of it at the edge of the final third, doing his best to hold off Sinkgraven, who stuck to him like glue. A quick hesitation, and he faked a cut inward only to knock the ball down the line powerfully.

"And we're off to the races," Derek Rae exclaimed as both players surged down the flank, quickly reaching the side of the box. Pröger had the advantage of moving first and quickly closed down on the ball.

Without trying to take an extra touch, he used his momentum to send in an arced cross before Sinkgraven could interfere. The cross curled wickedly toward the penalty spot, a teasing delivery begging for someone to get on the end of it. Michel surged in from the blind side of Lars Bender, leaping just ahead of his marker—but he couldn't generate the power. The ball glanced off his forehead and spun wide of the far post.

Gasps erupted from the Paderborn end, followed by generous applause from the home fans who loved what they saw from their team. "Paderborn certainly doesn't look like a team fighting relegation tonight," Stewart Robson noted, his tone level. "Their transitions have real venom to them. Michel did well to attack that near post, but he'll have wished for an extra inch of height."

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Leverkusen were quick to regain their composure. Hrádecký rolled the ball short to Jonathan Tah, who took a steady touch and looked up, scanning Paderborn's aggressive front line. The hosts had already pulled back into their own half, with the two strikers hovering in the passing lanes between the holding midfielders.

Tah ignored the temptation of a long ball and instead played it right to Lars Bender, who kept it moving toward Sven, the elder twin. The ball rotated across Leverkusen's defensive shell in rhythmic triangles. It

was a calm build-up designed to bait the Paderborn players forward. Srbeny hovered in a half-press, while Michel shadowed Baumgartlinger, preventing any easy escape into midfield.

After three passes, Demirbay dropped deeper to receive, pulling Vasiliadis with him. A clever little give-and-go with Tah allowed him to turn and find space in the left interior channel. He shifted the ball wide to Sinkgraven, who was already beginning his run down the left third. Diaby stayed high and wide, pinned to the chalk, giving Dräger something to think about.

Sinkgraven played Diaby short, but before the Frenchman could even shift his weight to face the goal, Dräger was at his hip—one hand on the small of his back, the other extended for balance. Diaby had no choice but to bounce it back to Demirbay, who swung it across to Sven Bender on the other side of the pitch.

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The German fullback confidently chested the ball down, bringing it under control before Antwi-Adjei could get close. Sven Bender took one touch forward and scanned the horizon, ignoring the bait of a long diagonal. Instead, he clipped a clean pass into Bellarabi's feet, who had just checked short near the right edge of the middle third. The winger cushioned it perfectly and pivoted toward Jans, who backed off instinctively.

Bellarabi didn't hesitate. A quick drop of the shoulder and a lunge forward, he exploded into the gap down the right touchline. Havertz floated into the inside channel, acting as a shadow runner, dragging Gjasula and Schonlau with him. With the angle narrowing, Bellarabi fired a cross into the corridor, which came low and fast, skipping across the six-yard box.

Volland had darted to the near post, but he couldn't quite wrap his foot around it. The ball raced harmlessly through the area, curling away from danger and out the other side. "That's a wicked delivery," Derek Rae muttered. "All it needed was a boot—or even a shin."

"He did everything right from his approach to the way he slipped his marker," Stewart Robson added. "But Volland just couldn't get his timing right."

[18']

Paderborn regrouped with a slow build from the back following the close call. Kilian rolled it to Schonlau, who returned it calmly under pressure. Gjasula dropped in to offer an option, shielding the ball from Havertz with poise. He sent a simple pass to Vasiliadis, who turned sharply and fired a ball into Srbeny's chest near the final third.

Srbeny absorbed Lars Bender's presence with a solid plant of his right foot, cushioning the ball into his path. Without even looking, he knew Michel was arcing away from Jonathan Tah on the left side of the pitch. Srbeny laid it off first time, an angled pass through the left interior third that Michel sprinted onto, shifting the tempo as the Leverkusen defence rapidly dropped back.

The forward gathered the ball on the move, nudging it with the outside of his boot past Tah towards Leverkusen's box. Tah immediately turned to give chase, but Michel had the step. Michel took another stride forward, but with the angle tightening and Lars Bender recovering toward the near post, his options narrowed. Srbeny wasn't yet in position, and Antwi-Adjei was arriving late on the opposite side.

Michel chopped inside on his right, hoping to carve out space for a shot, but Tah stayed on his feet, standing him up as he pulled across from him. The striker wound up, but it was all a feint and Tah bit, allowing him to nudge it clear of him. Without hesitation, his foot flashed towards the rolling ball, firing off a cannon of a shot to the far-right side.



Michel's strike lashed through the air like a missile, slicing low and fast toward the far post. Hrádecký had only a blink to react and dove to his left, his body fully extended. His fingertips stretched to their limit and just managed to get the faintest touches to the ball.

It was enough, though, to divert the ball's path and send it clipping the outside of the post and thudding against the advertising board. Gasps erupted from both ends of the stadium. A handful of home supporters had already started to rise in celebration, only to sit back down in disappointment.

"Would you believe it?" Derek Rae exclaimed, voice reverberating through the commentary booth. "Hrádecký gets the slightest fingertip, and it's enough!"

"A brilliant strike, an even better save," Robson added with a nod. "You can't teach those instincts; great players just rise to the occasion."

Chapter 503 503 vs Paderborn (2)

[Home Deluxe Arena, Paderborn | 19/01/2020 | Game week 18 | Time: 17:10 | Minute: 20']

Following Hrádecký's brilliant save, things calmed down a little as both teams battled for possession. Paderborn were the team on the back foot, but perhaps due to their precarious league position or the fact that they were playing at home, their defensive intensity was top-notch. Despite Leverkusen holding the lion's share of possession, they struggled to break through the opposing goal.

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In the 20th minute, Dräger found himself turned into a pretzel by Diaby, who hit him with a back-and-forth feint at the left edge of the box. Using the defender's sudden loss of composure, he nudged the ball down the line and immediately exploded after it. The ball remained glued to his feet as he broke into the box with speed, causing the Paderborn defence to collapse on him.

Kilian left Volland's to his defensive partner as goalkeeper Zingerle closed down the near post. Despite there being better options, the lack of clear passing lanes left him with no choice but to pull the trigger himself, not like he would have it any other way. "DIABY!" Derek Rae's cry echoed just as the Frenchman struck with his left foot, low and vicious from a tight angle, aiming for that gap between Zingerle and the post.

The keeper fell backwards, his foot striking out, awkwardly deflecting the shot with his thigh, sending it out for a corner. The roar of the home fans drowned out the groans of the away fans as they celebrated their keeper's heroics. "Brave attempt from the French winger, but Zingerle rose to the challenge, keeping his team on level footing." Steward Robson exclaimed as the Leverkusen players set up for the corner.

Havertz was the one to execute the set piece, swinging in a pacy cross aimed for Tah's head. The German defender rose above the pack, his head firmly connecting with the ball, but was unable to bring it down, sending it flying into the stands. After giving the home fans another bout of heart palpitations, the home team quickly regrouped for the goal kick.

Almost conceding must have lit a fire in the Paderborn side, as they began playing more aggressively. Like hungry wolves, they hunted down the red lions, forcing them to play wide. The moment they managed to regain possession of the ball, they did not linger to attempt a slow build-up but instead surged on all fronts.

A couple of times, they managed to threaten the Leverkusen goal, but it was in the 25th minute that their first real chance arose. Diaby, after managing to lose his marker, exploded up the wing ready to take on Paderborn's right back Dräger. However, the moment he crossed the final third, he found himself surrounded by bodies of Paderborn defenders.

He tried to turn away and find a friendly pair of feet, but he turned right into a vicious slide tackle by Gjasul. Diaby rolled in protest, but the referee motioned for play to continue. Dräger picked up the loose ball and sent a weighted pass up the flank, sending Pröger on a run.

The Paderborn Right winger managed to beat Sinkgraven in the foot race, latching onto the ball and immediately breaking into the box at the byline. Watching the Leverkusen keeper block the front post and Tah converge on him, he sent a cut-back to the top of the box. "Vasiliadis with a monstrous strike!" Derek exclaimed as the home fans jumped to their feet in anticipation.

Vasiliadis, who had been making a gradual run up the middle lane the moment the counter started, found himself unmarked the moment he slipped away from Demirbay's marking. He met the ball cleanly, striking it with the laces of his right boot. The shot tore through the air like a javelin—low, skipping just above the turf and curling ever so slightly toward the top-left corner.

Hrádecký, who was at the near post, just moments ago, did not even have the time to think, let alone react. Lady luck was on his side, though as a second late, a loud THWACK resounded as the shot bounced off the bar. The ball ricocheted with a violent clang off the underside of the crossbar and bounced downward, just outside the goal line, before being hacked clear by Lars Bender with a violent half-volley.

A collective gasp surged through the stadium, followed by a loud murmur from the Paderborn fans, many of whom had already thrown their hands in the air in celebration. "Was that in?! Surely not—play continues!" shouted Derek Rae as replays started to queue on screens around the stadium. There was no goal-line technology in the minds of the spectators, only suspense.

However, the replay clearly showed the ball bouncing outside of the lines despite the loyal's protests. The home side managed to retain possession of the ball, but with Leverkusen clearly rattled by the narrow escape, they slowed the tempo. Their formation became narrower, dropping deeper, putting an extra emphasis on defence first.

Baumgartlinger and Demirbay began dropping deeper to receive the ball, trying to regain control and take the sting out of the game. But Paderborn were now emboldened, their midfield pressing higher, trying to force mistakes. Peter Bosz barked from the sideline, his voice hoarse as he nitpicked on everything his team did wrong.

He was calling for composure, but his animated gestures suggested anything but. Every misplaced pass, every lost duel seemed to draw a frustrated wave of his arms toward the pitch. Even when they performed a good tackle, he would call for them to keep playing and inject more energy into their gameplay. The Dutch coach knew his team was better than this, but he needed them to deliver on that belief.

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The intensity of Paderborn's pressing began to pay dividends around the half-hour mark. Baumgartlinger, receiving a pass from Tah under pressure, took one touch too many as he looked for where to offload the hot potatoes. Antwi-Adjei hunted him down like a hungry wolf chasing him down once he began to panic and proceeded to use his body to disposes the Austrian, immediately laying the ball off to Vasiliadis.

The Greek midfielder didn't hesitate, spraying a diagonal ball out to the right flank where Pröger was already making his run. Sinkgraven caught between closing down the pass and tracking the runner, chose poorly, stepping up to steal the ball a split second too late as Pröger collected the ball in stride. "Paderborn breaks again! This is becoming a pattern now," Derek Rae's voice carried the building tension as the home side surged forward once more.

Pröger drove toward the byline, his pace eating up the ground as Tah Scrambled to close the angle whilst Sinkgraven scrambled to recover. Seeing this, Tah stood him up a couple of yards, doing textbook side steps, leaving no room for an easy breakthrough. However, just as Sinkgraven managed to recover, the German winger checked inside, then back out, leaving the Dutch left-back wrong-footed.

Swinging his foot, he delivered a slippery low cross into the six-yard box, managing to get the ball to skip past Tah's outstretched boot. Srbeny had been making a clever run, timing his dart toward the near post to perfection. Bender tried to battle it out with him for possession, but the Paderborn striker proved more determined.

Stretching his foot out, he managed to make contact with the incoming ball before Hrádecký, who was rushing out, could pounce. He managed to do just enough to redirect the ball between the gaps of the keeper's outstretched gloves and leg. A second later, the oh-so-sweet sound of the ball piercing the back of the net resounded as the more than 10,000 home fans jumped up in celebration.

[Paderborn 1:0 Leverkusen]

The Home Deluxe Arena erupted into absolute pandemonium as Srbeny raced off to the corner flag, his arms spread wide like an eagle soaring over the ecstatic home crowd. "What a moment for the home side!" Derek Rae bellowed over the deafening roar. "Paderborn have taken the lead against all odds, and the Home Deluxe Arena has gone absolutely mad!"

Steward Robson's analysis cut through the celebration: "It's been coming, Derek. The intensity of Paderborn's pressing has been relentless, and Leverkusen have looked increasingly uncomfortable under that pressure. Brilliant work from Pröger on the right flank, and Srbeny with the poacher's finish."

Peter Bosz stood motionless on the touchline, his hands on his hips, staring at the pitch with a mixture of disbelief and frustration. His animated gesturing had momentarily ceased as the reality of falling behind a relegation-threatened side sank in. A couple of yards away in the home coaching area, Steffen Baumgart was pumping his fists toward the crowd, happy that his gamble of high-intensity pressing had paid immediate dividends.

Chapter 504 504 Band-Aid

[Home Deluxe Arena, Paderborn | 19/01/2020 | Game week 18 | Time: 17:10 | Minute: 33']

The celebrations in the Home Deluxe Arena seemed to last an eternity, with Srbeny finally being mobbed by his teammates near the corner flag. The Serbian striker had given his side exactly what they needed—a moment of magic to reward their relentless pressing and defensive solidity. As the players gradually made their way back to their positions, the atmosphere remained electric, with every home fan on their feet, scarves raised high above their heads.

[33]

The restart was met with thunderous applause still echoing through the stands, the home crowd sensing blood in the water. For all of Leverkusen's technical superiority, they had been rocked—rattled by a side playing with nothing to lose and everything to prove. Leverkusen tried to gather themselves, shifting the ball with intent from flank to flank.

Demirbay and Havertz began to take on more responsibility, dropping deeper to collect possession and initiate transitions, but the weight of Paderborn's press only continued to intensify. Since their strategy had paid off, it was only natural for them to continue doing what worked. Leverkusen slowly tried to claw back control with a more physical play style, forcing their opponents to battle for the win.

The ball zipped from Bender to Baumgartlinger, then to Demirbay, who looked up and fired a piercing diagonal to Bellarabi on the right. The veteran winger took it down with finesse and darted at Jans, who

was already limping from an earlier clash. With one explosive burst, Bellarabi ghosted past him and fired a dangerous low cross into the box—but Kilian was there again, stoic and sturdy, cutting it out just in time.

Moments later, another opportunity fell to Volland after Havertz squeezed a clever reverse pass through a sliver of space. Volland unleashed a shot just outside the D, but it lacked conviction—Zingerle collected it without fuss.

[39]

In the 39th minute, Antwi-Adjei once again used his electric pace to burn past Lars Bender on the left. Cutting in sharply, he teed up Srbeny with a crisp ground pass into the box. This time, Srbeny's first touch let him down, and Jonathan Tah was quick to recover, muscling the striker off balance before he could fire.

"He got a little too eager in that one." Derek commented as the Leverkusen players calmly re-established control of the ball.

"Well, can you blame him? He's already tasted the sweetness of scoring," Robson commented with a light smile. "Nonetheless, at his level, he needs to be more composed."

Despite the Leverkusen players seemingly waking up from their daze, their opponents were sharp when it came to winning second balls. Gjasula and Vasiliadis were everywhere, intercepting, pressing, and launching quick outlets to the wings. Their energy was infectious; even the fans in the stands could feel it.

[43]

Havertz tried to pull something out of nothing just before the half, weaving through two midfielders and slipping into the space in front of the box just behind the midfielders. He turned away from danger and spotted Diaby cutting into the box on the left. Diaby timed his run to perfection, darting between Dräger and Schonlau as Havertz threaded the needle.

The through ball was inch-perfect, meeting Diaby's stride just as he stepped into the box. The Frenchman didn't hesitate—he wrapped his left foot around the ball and fired it across goal, hoping to catch Zingerle off guard or find a teammate ghosting in at the far post. Volland lunged, cleats grazing the turf as he extended, but the ball flew just ahead of his outstretched boot and skidded out the other side untouched. A collective gasp rose from the away end as they once again breathed a sigh of relief.

"Leverkusen are finally starting to look like themselves again, but is it a little too late for this half?" Derek asked as the home team restarted with a short goal kick.

[45+1]

The referee glanced at his watch and signalled for a single minute of added time. Leverkusen pushed forward with urgency, sensing one last opportunity to level the score before the break. The ball circulated quickly through their midfield triangle, Demirbay, Havertz, and Baumgartlinger trying to find an opening.

On the far touchline, Bellarabi shifted into space, hugging the line before slipping a pass into the half-space for Demirbay, who shaped to cross. His delivery was a lofted cross meant for Volland, but once again, Kilian rose like a tower, nodding the ball clear with assurance. Paderborn looked to spring the counter from the clearance as Antwi-Adjei gave chase to the loose ball.



He blew past a backtracking Demirbay before being clipped, or more precisely, overrun by Baumgartlinger. The Defensive midfielder had his arms raised throughout their contact, letting his body stop Antwi-Adjei, who was off balance. The free kick was taken short as Baumgart's men looked to retain possession and drain the final seconds. A few seconds later, the referee powerfully blew his whistle twice, bringing the first-half proceedings to an end.

[HALF-TIME: Paderborn 1 – 0 Bayer Leverkusen]

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Anxiety poured through Peter Bosz, like some sort of electrical storm roiling in his brain as he followed the proceedings on the pitch from the away tactical area. It was already the 55th minute, 10 minutes into the second half, and yet the game was not proceeding according to plan. He had never been a superstitious person in his entire life.

But for the first time ever, he started doubting the world, wondering whether one of his players had recently attracted bad luck from somewhere else and passed it on to the team. He couldn't find a plausible explanation for his team conceding so soon into the second half. Starting from the very first minute of the second half, they'd managed to begin mounting a series of relentless attacks on Paderborn's box.

They fired shots from every angle, making it almost seem like a World War two carpet bombardment. His players had played some good football, exchanging passes with quick precision as they bore down on Molde's goal. They'd clearly been the better team and outclassed Paderborn in all areas on the field of play.

Be that as it may, the gap between them and the home team had been extended by one more goal. It came through a corner kick when the clock on the big screen had just indicated that it was the 50th minute. Peter felt like the entire world was working against his team when Kilian rose a head above the pack to powerfully head the ball into, the back of the net.

[Paderborn 2:0 Leverkusen]

[50]

"KILIAN RISES—AND PADERBORN DOUBLE THEIR LEAD!" Derek Rae's voice cracked through the din as the centre-back's bullet header smashed in off the underside of the bar. "Home Deluxe Arena is in absolute raptures—2-0, and Leverkusen have a mountain to climb now!"

Stewart Robson picked up the thread once the replay rolled. "Text-book set-piece execution, Derek. Vasiliadis whips it into the perfect zone, Kilian sheds his marker, and times the jump superbly. You can't give a defender of that size a free run—Baumgartlinger loses him completely."

"Look at Baumgart on the touch-line—fists pumping, veins popping. He knew if they nicked another early, the momentum would swing even further their way," Rae added as the camera caught the Paderborn coach roaring at the South Stand.

On the opposite bench, Peter Bosz turned away, in distress as he entered firefighter mode, trying to find a Band-Aid to stem this bleeding. Arms crossed, he barked a single order to the substitutes behind him—Rakim Rex and Nadiem Amiri were up and loosening hamstrings before the restart whistle even sounded.

The second goal had jolted Leverkusen like a splash of ice water. This forced Bosz to make early changes following the game restart. Following a throw-in, the fourth official signalled to the referee of the two substitutes who were already waiting at his side. The board was raised a moment later, signalling that Rakim Rex was replacing Bellarabi on the right, and Nadiem Amiri for Baumgartlinger, with Demirbay sliding back beside Havertz in a single-pivot 4-1-4-1.

Rakim's entry into the match was warmly received by the away fans in attendance and watching from behind screens. However, most thought that it was little to as the momentum had firmly shifted towards their opponents. "Oh, he might fancy a pop from out there and he strikes..."

Chapter 505 505 Desperate Changes

[Home Deluxe Arena, Paderborn | 19/01/2020 | Game week 18 | Minute: 58]

The first chance after the restart was almost scripted as the ball fell naturally to the new man. Demirbay, now anchoring alone, chested the throw-in down as he muscled his marker away, causing him to stumble. He didn't bother to check on him, though, as he clipped a clever chip out toward the right touchline.

Rakim Rex cushioned it on the outside of his boot, glided inside Jans and took a second to scan the field in front of him. "Oh, he might fancy a pop from out there and he strikes..." Derek Rae exclaimed as Rakim fired a shot from 25 metres out. The ball flew violently, moving erratically in the air as it dipped nastily, forcing Zingerle to shuffle and tip over with both palms.

"What a save from Zingerle, he nearly had a moment to react to that shot," Stewart Robson noted. "What a way for the young lad to introduce himself to this crowd."

The corner that followed was only half-cleared, and moments later Amiri drove a low skimmer from distance that scraped the advertising boards. Leverkusen's intent was clear: raise the tempo, force errors, shoot on sight.

Paderborn tried to play the goal kick short, but Jans Berley had the chance to take control of the ball before Rakim closed him down. The winger used his fresh legs to pressure the left-back, forcing him to hastily play the ball back to Zingerle. "Oh, that's a hospital ball," Derek exclaimed as both the keeper and Volland charged towards the ball that seemed to rapidly lose speed.

Zingerle lunged forward and put his foot through the ball, smashing it clear a heartbeat before Volland could slide in. The home team breathed a sigh of relief as they watched the ball fly up the field, but the mocking words of the commentators quickly pissed them off. "Derek, is that what they call a deer-in-the-headlights moment?" Stewart Robson asked his co-commentator with clear amusement laced in his tone.

"No, my friend, the only way to describe that is sloppy, no buts about it. A bit of composure is a basic requirement; being so easily rattled to make a mistake that almost caused his team a goal is worrying." Derek Rae commented as the game unfolded below continued to unfold.

Amiri and Rakim injected new energy into the Leverkusen squad as they searched for a goal. Rakim and Diaby quickly started attacking both flanks using their pace and skills to cause nearby defenders to panic. It quickly became apparent that the Paderborn defence was struggling to legally contain them.

Quite a few times, both wingers found themselves at the end of a foul, but it was in the 63rd minute when the referee reached into his pocket. "Gjasula will be thanking his lucky stars for only receiving a yellow after that tackle," Derek stated with exasperation as Diaby received medical attention a couple of yards out of the box.

"I don't know what he was thinking coming in from the back like that, it was always going to result in a booking," Stewart Robson commented as they continued to analyse how the Red Lions could utilise this setpiece.

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With Diaby gingerly back on his feet, the referee paced out the ten yards between the wall and the ball, placing a hand on his whistle. Kai and Rakim stood over the set piece this time, murmuring to each other. The home fans whistled, stomped, and waved scarves to throw off the taker, but the Leverkusen bench rose as one in anticipation.

Kai feinted a run, letting Rakim take it instead, who didn't hesitate to whip in an out-swinging delivery towards the back post. The ball curled nastily just over Schonlau's leap and clipped the crown of Volland's head. It ricocheted inches wide of the far post. "OH, that could've gone anywhere!" Derek Rae bellowed, his voice nearly drowned by the reactions of the crowd.

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The crowd's nervous chatter hadn't yet died down when Zingerle restarted play quickly, hoping to bypass Leverkusen's increasingly intense press. But Paderborn were beginning to show cracks—not just physically, but mentally. Gjasula, already on a yellow, hesitated under pressure from Amiri and played a limp sideways pass toward Vasiliadis.

Demirbay pounced, intercepting the pass and immediately feeding Diaby, who had drifted inside. The Frenchman skipped past Dräger, took a touch too heavy, only for the ball to ricochet kindly off Kilian's boot and fall at the feet of Rakim. The crowd held its breath as he deftly took control of it, looking poised to take a shot.

The expected shot never came, though, as instead, he dipped a shoulder, freezing Jans mid-lunge. Before the fullback could regroup, he looped a curving pass around him, aiming for the far post. Havertz, who had peeled off his marker, charged forward, sliding feet first to reach the ball first.

Zingerle tried to shuffle across his line and dived towards the ball, but it was too late, as Kai's foot hit the ball. A second later, the only sound resounding in the area was that of the jumping away fans who let their joy be heard. "2–1! And it's game on at the Home Deluxe Arena!" Derek exclaimed as the Leverkusen players stormed after Havertz in celebration.

"That's a sensationally composed assist by Rakim Rex. He had the shot on, but he made the right decision. His awareness and timing to spot Havertz's run and deliver that perfectly measured ball—it's just superb." Stewart shouted over the rising roar from the away end. The Paderborn ultras fell silent for the first time all night. A few looked stunned, while others shook their heads in frustration. On the sidelines, Peter Bosz could be seen pumping both fists in joy before going on to bark instructions.

[Paderborn 2:1 Leverkusen]

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The stadium atmosphere had shifted dramatically with the shift in momentum. Where once the home faithful had been a wall of noise, now pockets of frustrated murmurs rippled through the stands. Baumgart prowled his technical area like a caged animal, gesturing wildly at his players to push higher up the pitch.

"Paderborn needs to respond quickly here," Derek Rae observed as the home side passed the ball within their backcourt under pressure from the Red Lions. Steffen Baumgart paced frantically along his technical area, his animated gestures betraying his frustration as he watched his team's composure crumble under Leverkusen's relentless pressure.

No longer able to hesitate, he motioned for two of his players who had been warming up to approach. "Stephan, I want you to go in there and contain that Kid, let him have the wing but the moment he cuts in give him a warm welcome," he instructed as he watched the Filipino national nod his head in understanding as his gaze remained focused on the pitch.

"Kapič, I need you to break up that midfield play and remain seated on that 11 Amiri when defending, don't let him organise attacks from the back." He instructed, locking eyes with Bosnian to see if his instructions were received. Upon seeing the nod and slightly goofy smile of a player who was simply excited to play he held back a sigh. "Gentlemen were so close to the finish line now we just bring it over the finish line."

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He managed to make his substitution after a wild pop from Rakim who had abruptly cut inwards at the edge of the box. His move had left everyone lacking allowing him to gain a bit of space to take the shot. With the keeper closer to the near post his short which arced to the top left corner seemed destined for goal.

He failed to wrap his boot around the ball enough, not generating enough spin, missing the inside of the goal by mere inches. The away section gasped in unison, a handful of fans already on their feet, thinking it was in. Rakim stood frozen for a beat, hands on hips, lips pursed in frustration, as he shook his head in frustration. Zingerle, who had barely moved, reached for his water bottle and towel, wiping another bout of sweat.

"Rex again, he's brought his game boots today and is making it his personal mission to give that Paderborn defence a hard time," Stewart Robson observed. "Every time he touches the ball, something happens."

Baumgart finally made his double substitution: Gerrit Stephan Holtmann replaced Laurent Jans taking over the left-back position. Kapič replaced the Albanian Klaus Gjasula in midfield who had been struggling to find footing since the beginning of the second half.

Chapter 506 506 Paderborn (3)

[Home Deluxe Arena, Paderborn | 19/01/2020 | Game week 18 | Minute: 76]

[76]

The momentum, Baumgart had hoped to stop refused to shift as Kai Havertz seemed to tap into the Zone. Playing further up, he let Demirbay take up his defensive duties and started connecting the midfield like a tank maestro. He wasn't delicate in his passes like De Bruyne, nor were his passes short and controlled like Xavi, but he controlled the team's tempo like a prime Champions League Modric with the warrior spirit of Nedved.

The Paderborn players quickly had a problem, especially when he lifted the ball between two defenders, breaking through their attempt to sandwich him. One grabbed his arm, and the other tugged his shirt, but Kai remained upright despite the slight imbalance. Pulling the ball back before another defender could interfere, he lifted a quick pass over Gerrit to the area around the corner flag.

Rakim was already in motion, breaking past the turning Gerrit, jumping into the air, his right foot snaked behind his left leg and deftly touched the ball down as he faced Gerrit. The Paderborn substitute Gerrit Holtmann, fresh into the match, squared up instantly. Rakim didn't give him the luxury of adapting as he performed a stepover, then faked a cutback, only to burst down the line, cutting so tightly along the by-line that even the touchline seemed to lean out of his way. With a flick of his toe, he nutmegged Holtmann, who attempted to make up for his mistake.



Snaking past him, he sent a driven pass out to the area in front of the front post, causing the players to quickly turn their heads as they urged their legs to reach. Volland got there first, his shot coming off the outside of his boot, low and angled, but Zingerle somehow managed to get a foot to the ball.

The ball bounced free, chaos erupting in the six-yard box. Amiri arrived next, trying to poke the rebound in, but his shot slammed into Schonlau's thigh and ricocheted out for a corner. "That was it! That was the equaliser!" Derek Rae exclaimed. "How on earth has that stayed out?!"

Stewart Robson also intoned as the away supporters clutched their heads in disbelief. "Phenomenal from Zingerle—he's the reason Paderborn are still clinging on. And you have to give credit to Rex again. Every time he's isolated a defender, he's wreaked havoc."

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The ensuing corner kick saw Amiri raise both arms, signalling a rehearsed set piece. He curled the ball toward the near post, where Tah stormed in with brutish momentum. He met it with a glancing header, but the angle was tight, and the ball skimmed just over the crossbar, landing on the roof of the net.

On the touchline, Peter Bosz could be seen muttering under his breath in Dutch, clipboard now discarded at his feet. He clapped rapidly, gesturing to the players to keep pushing. "Amiri, get back and control that midfield, faster transitions, gentlemen."

Meanwhile, Steffen Baumgart had gone from barking orders to crouching low beside the dugout, sweat beading down his temple despite the January chill. His substitutions had done little to stem the tide, and he needed to figure something out quickly; thus, he sought advice from his coaching staff. "Boss, it might be time to go ultra-defensive and hunker down."

"I would like to do that, Tim, but I fear that if we retreat that much, it might spur them to bombard us indiscriminately," Steffen voiced as they watched the Red Lions launch yet another long-range attempt from the area outside the box. "They simply have too much firepower for us to just sit back, and their wingers are particularly slicing through us like knives through hot butter."

"Then, how about a deep counter-attacking strategy, which will have Michel and Srbeny ready to explode forward at any moment using their speed and individual brilliance to create something?" Tim offered, after taking a moment to think about it, his suggestion stemmed from the disparity in player quality that existed, even though they still held the lead.

Steffen rubbed the back of his neck, eyes narrowed on the far sideline where Diaby was preparing to re-enter after receiving brief treatment for a cramp. "Alright, let's go with that then. Tell the boys to stay compact when out of possession, but the moment we win the ball, I want Pröger and Srbeny sprinting like their jobs depend on it. We'll use the width of the pitch and hit long balls for them to run onto."

Tim nodded and jogged toward the sideline, pulled over a nearby player and relayed his instructions. The instructions were immediately relayed to the rest of the team and caused an immediate chain reaction. The home team fell back into the final third, practically guarding their box like the wall of China.

Despite the adjustments, it was Leverkusen who came closest next. Rakim found himself isolated again on the right with Holtmann clinging tightly to his back. He spun off him with a slick Cruyff turn and took off down the channel. This time, he didn't even think of crossing. He paused just outside the box, and dragged the ball back, letting Holtmann slide past him in desperation.

He feinted outside, but his foot was more honest, dragging the ball inside as he fired a curling shot aimed at the top corner. The ball curled venomously, and this time it was on target, but Zingerle had already taken flight, fingertips doing just enough to send the ball clipping the top of the bar and

bouncing behind. "He's on fire, Derek. Absolutely terrorising them. You'd think he's the senior man on this pitch with the way he's playing," Stewart noted, half incredulous.

"And he's only seventeen," Derek added. "It's the confidence to try that in a tight game like this that does it for me. You can't teach that."

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Paderborn were now operating like a siege camp under storm—bodies behind the ball, Srbeny left alone up top like a decoy, and every clearance treated like a gold nugget. Ritter and Vasiliadis chased shadows in midfield as Kai Havertz orchestrated like a composer at full tempo.

Amiri switched play out to Sinkgraven, who quickly sent it up the flank to the feet of Diaby. The winger's first touch was immaculate as he laid it off to the surging Havertz in the central lane. The midfielder snaked past Vasiliadis with a dip of the shoulder before driving the ball forward to the feet of Volland.

The striker, with his back to goal, held off Kilian before laying the ball off to Diaby, who had continued his run, letting Havertz act as a decoy. Continuing his run, Diaby swept up the ball as he pierced the box with Dräger glued to his side.

Diaby didn't blink, and with Dräger clinging to his shoulder like a life vest, he dragged the ball forward with the outside of his left boot. He feinted a body shift right, then cut sharply back, body checking the leach as he cut back slightly onto his stronger foot. The momentum unbalanced Dräger, who stumbled, leaving room for Diaby to angle a shot toward the far bottom corner past the on-rushing Zingerle.

The keeper who had his body lowered in preparation lunged to his left, trying to intercept the ball that was skidded across the turf like a ground snake. (CLANG) The ball cannoned off the inside of the post causing a split-second of silence to engulf the arena.

Zingerle was already beaten. The away fans had risen, arms half-raised in celebration. Diaby had already started to turn, expecting the net to bulge. But instead of rippling twine, the ball ricocheted cruelly across the goalmouth, passing just behind the incoming Amiri, who had lunged, inches away from a tap-in.

A chorus of gasps erupted around the Home Deluxe Arena. For the home fans, it was divine intervention. For Leverkusen, it was another dagger to their hearts as causing them to question God and everything that was holy to them. "My enemies have succeeded in plotting against me, my friend." A Nigerian man wearing a Havertz kit exclaimed as he clutched his phone, which was illuminated on a betting app with an 18-game betting slip which had all been completed safely for the match he was watching.

"The Devil is a liar, Adebayo, my boy Rakim finna dance on all these fools any moment now." His friend, who looked like he walked straight out of the gym, stated as he rubbed his bare chest, feeling the January chill.

"Sabe a beg put on your top no gayl be checking for you at a football game when they got millionaires running around on the pitch." Adebayo retorted in mock annoyance, only to look up in shock as a sea of blue Paderborn players surged up the field for a counter.

"Michel surging up the flank, and he's got help from Srbeny and Antwi-Adjei, can they go all the way?" Derek Rae's booming voice resounded as the spectators jumped to their feet in anticipation.

Chapter 507 507 Chilly

[Home Deluxe Arena, Paderborn | 19/01/2020 | Game week 18 | Minute: 84]

Michel tore down the left touchline like a man possessed, the floodlights bouncing off the sweat on his brow. Srbeny galloped in support, and Antwi-Adjei, who'd somehow summoned the energy for one more sprint, surged into the opposite channel. It was a classic three-on-three counter with the rest of the 3 Leverkusen players hustling back.

Sinkgraven backpedalled, using a mix of sidesteps, trying to show Michel wide doing everything he could to delay him. Tah and Bender uniformly retreated with Tah acting as the anchor man, forming a temporary triangle, but Michel was relentless. In a matter of moments, they had crossed the halfway line, and the winger didn't show any hints of slowing down.

They both battled with their arms, but Michles' momentum gave him the upper hand quickly, allowing him to break past Sinkgraven. "Gym is that way, sir." Derek Rea exclaimed in excitement as Sinkgraven struggled to recover, but given that Michle was dribbling the ball, it made things easier.

Michle quickly cut across him, making things harder for him as they neared the box. Almost immediately, the moment he nudged the ball across the retreating Sinkgraven and cut towards the middle, Tah moved into action. He had been hanging back, acting like a libero, but in that moment, he exploded forward, angling his body slightly to face the winger.

Michel saw the shift in posture too late. Before he could react, Tah was already stepping in, and the Leverkusen defender timed his tackle with terrifying precision, lunging in with his right foot. The strike was clean and decisive. A swoosh of grass and boot later, Michel was airborne, and the ball was stopped at the end of his boot.

A second later, the Paderborn winger thudded into the turf, clutching his thigh in pain and frustration, trying to sell a foul. "That's a captain's tackle if I have ever seen one," Stewart Robson bellowed as Sinkgraven collected the loose ball before the referee could get any ideas.

"And with the game hanging in the balance, too, Stewart. That's what you call nerves of steel," Derek Rae added.

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Sinkgraven light dribbled the ball forward, taking a moment to scan the field ahead. The players who had moments ago been storming down the pitch now came to a sudden stop, with only a few continuing to retreat. He thought about playing it safe to Havertz or up the flank to the retreating Diaby, but at the corner of his vision caught a raised arm.

Almost immediately, he understood the assignment and started dribbling forward at pace. Before the nearby Pröger could close him down at the edge of the middle third, he raised his arms and drew his leg back. (Boom) A second later, his right foot connected with the ball, catapulting it forward as it diagonally flew to the other flank.

The pass was magnificent, arching over the midfield traffic like a cruise missile falling a couple of yards into the final third. All eyes were trained towards the landing point where a red blur was rapidly approaching, followed by Holtmann. Schonlau was also trying to gauge the landing point, but with the floodlights, he was having a hard time getting a read.

The ball descended like a gift from the heavens, and Rakim had reached its landing point first. Just as Holtmann was about to catch up to him, ready to pounce on the second ball, he let the ball strike his upper back, cushioning it with stunning delicacy. The bounce off his shoulder blades caused the ball to loop over Schonlau, falling to the feet of Volland.

The striker who had made a diagonal run across Kilian's blind side took a heavy touch and immediately exploded after it. "Oh, my word! He laid it off... with his back!" Derek Rae shouted, barely containing his disbelief.

"And what a way to do it, and now Volland is through on goal." Stewart echoed as Volland didn't break stride. His second touch steadied his run as he used his left shoulder to bodycheck Dräger, who was coming at an angle.

Now in the box with only the on-rushing keeper to beat, Volland opened his body, shaping for the far post. Zingerle rushed out, arms spread wide, lowering his stance, trying to make himself as big as possible. The roar of the crowd turned to a buzz of anticipation with no one daring to blink.

But the Leverkusen striker remained ice-cold. Instead of smashing it across the goal, he slipped the ball cheekily under Zingerle's legs, nutmegging the keeper. "GOAL! "KEVIN VOLLAND! Calm as you like! And just like that—Leverkusen complete the comeback! It's 2–2 in Paderborn!" Derek Rae howled over the sound of thousands erupting."

The net bulged a second later, causing the away section to detonate. Arms flung into the air, banners and scarves waving in the chilly wind in the Leverkusen corner, and the roar of satisfaction echoed around the Home Deluxe Arena like a war cry. "And that assist from Rakim Rex... Off the back? That's outrageous! Stewart, for a moment, I thought I was watching the Brasileiro Série A."

"That's the sort of thing you do on a futsal court, not in a Bundesliga scrap. It's confidence, instinct, and absolute class. Keep in mind he's still sixteen, Derek Sixteen!" Robson added, laughing in disbelief. "Though I bet Peter Bosz felt his heart drop at that moment, now he can brag and say it's part of the plan."

True to his words, Bosz could be seen in his technical area calling for someone to hand him water. None of this mattered to the players, though, as they followed Volland in celebrations. The striker stopped before their fans' corner and shrugged his shoulders before proceeding to run his biceps, acting as if he felt chilly.

[Paderborn 2:2 Leverkusen]

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Paderborn, visibly rattled, took their time with the restart. Srbeny stood with hands on hips at the halfway line, glaring toward the Leverkusen side, wondering if he was dreaming. Baumgart had both hands on his head, pacing like a man walking through fire. His assistant, Tim, didn't even bother whispering any suggestions, knowing that no amount of tactics could salvage the game.

The referee's whistle pierced the evening air, and Paderborn trudged back to the centre circle like condemned men. Michel, still nursing his pride from Tah's earlier tackle, exchanged a few heated words with Gjasula before taking his position. Moments later, the game was back underway as Srbeny rolled the ball to Antwi-Adjei, who immediately knocked it back to Schonlau.

The centre-back, desperate to inject some urgency into his team's play, clipped a long ball toward Pröger on the right wing. But Sinkgraven was there, reading the pass like an open book, and headed it clear with authority. "Time's running out for the visiting side. Now it's a question of whether they are content with nearly a draw."

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The fourth official raised his board: +4 minutes. Four minutes to decide who would take the victory in today's match. Leverkusen showed no signs of settling for a draw. As soon as Sinkgraven's header was cleared into midfield, Demirbay sprinted to collect the second ball and zipped a one-touch pass to Amiri, who turned sharply and sliced through the first line of Paderborn pressure like a scalpel through gauze. He threaded it forward to Havertz, who dropped deep to receive between opposing midfielders.

"They smell blood," Stewart Robson noted as Havertz sent a chipped-through ball down the right flank. Rakim was already streaking down the right flank again, full throttle, as if he hadn't played a single minute all match. The pass from Havertz was perfectly weighted, dropping just ahead of him and staying low enough to invite a first-time delivery.

Rakim didn't break stride as he whipped in a cross on the half-volley, lashing it low and fast across the face of goal like a tracer round. Volland was arriving again, crashing into the box with Kilian on his heels and Zingerle anticipating another one-on-one. But this time, the cross was just behind the striker—he attempted a backheel flick, but the ball clattered awkwardly off his ankle and dribbled away toward the far side.

Diaby retrieved it on the left edge of the box, feinted twice, then squared it back to Amiri at the edge of the D. Amiri went for power—his strike lashed straight at the defender, striking Schonlau square in the chest and dropping to the turf like a cannonball. Schonlau grimaced, winded, but managed to hack it clear as the entire Paderborn back line swarmed.

Chapter 508 508 Miss me with BS

[Full-Time | Home Deluxe Arena, Paderborn | Final Score: Paderborn 2–2 Bayer Leverkusen]

As the final whistle rang out—FWEEET, FWEEET, FWEEET—players dropped their shoulders, some with relief, others with bitter frustration. The Home Deluxe Arena buzzed with the chatter of fans still processing what they'd just witnessed. Most wanted a clear winner, and others were simply here out of boredom, but most were happy at the action-packed match they had witnessed.

"Well, there you have it, folks," Derek Rae began, his voice steady despite the chaos they'd just narrated. "In Game Week 18 of the Bundesliga, the clash between Paderborn and Leverkusen ends in a draw. 2–2 is all she wrote."

Stewart Robson added, "It was a match of two halves. Paderborn were electric in the first, but Leverkusen's second-half response, led by some brilliant moments of individual brilliance, completely flipping the momentum."

On the pitch, Kai Havertz, visibly exhausted but still composed, exchanged a respectful handshake with Sebastian Vasiliadis, while Zingerle, drenched in sweat and wrapped in his keeper's towel, collapsed onto the turf for a moment before being helped up by Schonlau.

Reporters quickly flooded the field to catch some of the players, but most quickly made their way into the tunnel. Despite feeling warm, given that they had just run over 8 miles in the match. Lucky or unlucky for most it was the big names like Haverts and Diaby who drew the hyenas' attention.

Rakim slipped through the tunnel after donning a team tracksuit handed to him by one of the coaches. He had no interest in speaking to the vultures, especially after failing to secure the win. He had won a free kick in the dying minutes of extra time at the edge of the box.

He and Havertz had argued over what to do, but in the end, he won, given that he had won the set piece. In the end, he trusted his skills and fired a rocket around the wall, but the ball didn't curl back enough. In the end, it impacted the outside of the net, harmlessly flying out for a goal kick.

It was frustrating coming so close to victory only to fall short at the last moment. Shaking his head in frustration, Rakim tucked his TitanHood further down, trying his best to fly under the radar as his boots clattered on the stone floor. Before he could move past the press area, where a group of reporters stood next to the Bundesliga advertisement board, someone called out to him.

"Rakim! Just a minute?" one reporter called out, prompting him to stop and turn in their direction as microphones were immediately shoved in his face. For a second, he was almost blinded by the camera flashes, giving him Men in Black flashbacks.

"Rakim, that was a dramatic second-half comeback. First of all, what's your take on the final result?" a kicker reporter questioned, pushing his mike further forward, close enough to almost bump Rakim's chin.

Holding back the urge to glare at the man, he recoiled slightly before locking gazes with the man. "Frustrating," he said plainly. "We came here expecting to win. The way we started the second half, we knew we could break them down. But football doesn't always listen to one's desire."

"You had a hand in both goals, especially that assist to Havertz. But that free kick at the end—how close did it feel? And do you think you should have been put into the game earlier, considering your contributions to your team's comeback?" another reporter wearing the ZDF badge queried, not letting him settle for a single moment.

Rakim exhaled through his nose, letting the question hang for a moment, wondering how to navigate this minefield. "Look, it's a simple question of confidence," he began, voice calm but clipped, "the free kick—I backed myself. I always will, I've hit those in training a hundred times, and today it missed by inches. It just means I'll have to take a few hundred more in training."

He glanced to the side, nodding at an acquaintance before continuing to answer the question. As for the timing of my sub... that's not my call. We've got a manager with a plan, and we trust that. I just try to be ready when my number comes up."

The reporters murmured among themselves, but before anyone could interject with another sharp follow-up, Rakim raised a hand, slightly stopping any questions. "But yeah," he added, tone shifting subtly. "I'm proud of how we fought back. We were two down, away from home, and we didn't fold. We showed what we were made of."

There was a pause following his words, and just as he was about to leave, one younger journalist raised his hand. "Did you say anything to Volland before that second goal? You two looked like you'd rehearsed it."

Rakim chuckled slightly, letting the first smile since the interview grace his face. "Nah, nothing rehearsed. I just knew where he'd be and trusted him to finish it off,"

"Last one, what do you have to say about your biological father wanting to reconnect with you?" a Sky Sports reporter asked, instantly chilling the atmosphere as everyone turned towards Rakim, eagerly waiting for an answer.

"I don't got time for this," was all he said as he threw his hood back on and proceeded to walk off towards the changing room. Ignoring the clamour of reporters wanting an answer to a question they had been shoving down his throat since New Year.

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The post-match proceedings went by quite quickly as Peter Bosz stated they would have an analysis meeting tomorrow afternoon. Rakim honestly didn't care either way as he simply went through his post-match routine. He was one of the first on the bus, turning up his Beats headphones, trying to catch up on his sleep.

The two-and-a-half-hour bus ride went by in a flash in the almost silent bus. No one was in the mood to joke, so they simply enjoyed the red home arriving at the BayArena a little past 11 pm. They directly split up from there, and Rakim hopped into his i8, wasting no time to drive to his house.

Yes, he had finally gotten around to finding a place after the New Year's debacle. It was more a case of self-preservation since the paparazzi had become more daring, and the hotel's security became as trustworthy as politicians. Once he realised that the staff was going through his trash, he knew he had a problem.

Lucky for him, his realtor had a few houses lined up and given that he was only renting for now, it wasn't hard to find a place. Turns out that if you have enough money, the world tends to move on your time. His i8 softly roared as he drove into the Hahnwald neighbourhood area and despite it not being a closed community its security was top notch in the city.

Five minutes into the estate, the i8 came to a stop in front of a metal gate, stopping for a moment as the security system recognised its plates. Looking out of the window at the metal box that proceeded to scan his face, a second green light lit up, followed by the metallic chime of the thick metal gate sliding to the left, opening up a path to the villa.

Driving through the white stone bend that was covered by imported bamboo trees on either side. The bamboo-lined path curved one final time, making an S shape before Rakim's new house came into view. It is a 3-bedroom 2-bathroom small villa with all the modern amenities he could need, from a gym, a sauna, to a swimming pool.

The two-story villa appeared to float above perfectly manicured grounds, with subtle LED strips outlining its geometric edges against the evening sky. He parked the i8 in the three-car garage, next to his Sián FKP 37, which was covered under a silver car tarpaulin. Not wasting time, he stepped out of the car just as the garage door slid shut behind him with a whisper-quiet hum.

Duffel bag in hand, he walked through the garage entrance into the main house. "Honey, I'm home!" he exclaimed, but all that greeted him was silence. Sighing, he walked through the foyer, exchanging his sneakers for house slippers before two pairs of paws and claws scratched the marble ground as they rapidly approached him.

(Woof) A powerful bark greeted him as Zeus jumped into his embrace and proceeded to attack him with his young. "I missed you, too, boy, but it's not like I've been gone for more than 6 hours. Plus, little Emilia came to watch you," Rakim retorted with a bright smile before gently nudging him down."

Chapter 509 509 007's Lawyer?

[Rose Isle, Orlando | 19/01/2020 | Time: 17:21]

"What are we gonna do about the Marquess?" Lisa asked as she plopped down on her bed, slipping under the covers as she rested against the headboard. "I know he doesn't have any parental rights, but still, it's not like we can cut off the emotional bonds."

Ben looked up from his laptop, pressing send on the email he had been composing. "(sigh) There is not much we can really do except let things run their course. Whatever happens, we just need to support our son like we always have."

"I just don't get it; how can someone have a kid and not know it till decades later?" She complained with a slight pout, resting her head on his shoulder. "Thinking about the state he was in when he found us makes me angry just thinking about it. And now what? He wants a relationship with him."

Ben closed the laptop and placed it gently on the nightstand, his eyes narrowing with the weight of his thoughts. He wrapped an arm around Lisa, pulling her close as he spoke. "I know," he said quietly. "But this is his father we are talking about, no matter how angry he may be, the man is a connection to his late mother."

Lisa exhaled slowly, her fingers subconsciously tracing a line across Ben's chest. "I know... I know that. And I'm not trying to be petty or possessive, but it just blindsided us out of nowhere."

"(Sigh) Have you spoken to him? I know he is all alone in Germany right now, ever since May went to stay with her grandparents." Ben asked with a slight crinkle of his brow as he breathed in her scent.

"We talked briefly when he got home, but he doesn't want to talk about what happened in London. Plus, I'm not quite sure what happened between him and May; they have been off since Christmas Day." Lisa lamented snuggling deeper into Ben's embrace, "I'm sure they will work out whatever it is, though I doubt Rakim is taking the time to figure things out right now."

Ben kissed the top of her head and gave her a soft squeeze. "They will be alright," he repeated, more to reassure himself than her. "We just have to trust that things will work out and just be ready to help when they need us." Lisa nodded against his chest; the room dim save for the soft golden glow of the bedside lamp. Outside, the Florida night was calm—the occasional chirp of crickets the only soundtrack as the household settled into stillness.

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[Glebe Road, Cambridge, Cambridgeshire | 20/01/2020 | Time: 08:20]

(Ding Dong)

The chime echoed through the quiet, sun-dappled hallway of the modest but charming red-brick townhouse nestled on Glebe Road. A soft clatter followed as footsteps rushed across the hardwood floor.

"Coming!" a voice called from inside, and a second later Jenna McKinnon, dressed in an oversized grey hoodie and leggings, appeared, a sleepy yawn calling her back to sleep. "Oh, May hi... huh MAY it's YOU!"

Before May could even react, she found herself pulled into a tight hug as the smaller girl squeezed all the air out of her body. May laughed, muffled in the crook of Jenna's shoulder. "Hi to you, too, Jen, can you let me breathe, please?"

Jenna finally pulled back, pushing her glasses up her nose with both hands before stepping aside to let May in. "You didn't say you were coming. I honestly thought I was dreaming for a second," Jen said as she grasped the latter's hand, pulling her inside along with her bags. "Wait, what are you doing here? Don't get me wrong, I'm happy to see you, but you have been MIA since Christmas, and none of us have been able to reach you."

May stepped into the narrow entryway, the familiar scent of jasmine-scented candles and leftover takeaway hitting her all at once. This place was way more high-end than the apartment her friends had been renting the previous semester, but some things never changed. Just looking around, she could see their touch in the decor, judging by how messy things were, they were coming off a wild night, given that both of them are clean freaks.

"I know I just needed some time to figure things out for myself." May quickly explained her voice, taking a slightly sombre tone. "Didn't Rakim tell you I went to my grandparents in Tennessee?"



"He did, but from the sound of it, he hasn't been able to reach you either," Jenna responded as she led her friend to the kitchen, offering her a cup of coffee. "Plus, you should have called us, no matter what was bothering you; radio silence for 26 days is not right"

Looking at her friend, who now had her hands on her hip, looking ready to lecture her like a disapproving mother, May quickly apologised. "Sorry," she simply said, not wanting to get into that this early in the morning after an 8-hour flight.

Jenna's expression softened as she watched May sink into one of the sleek bar stools by the kitchen island, her exhaustion plain despite her fresh makeup and effortlessly stylish athleisure fit. With a sigh, Jenna slid a mug across the counter. "You better drink that and go wash up before the girls wake up, it gets really competitive over bathrooms in this house."

"Wait, this place is big, don't tell me you only have 1 bathroom?" May asked with her hand, gesturing around the house's high ceiling and fancy amenities that likely came with the house. It looked more like a family home from the outside, well, a 3-story family home, but nonetheless, it didn't look like a typical villa.

"Well, yeah, it has like 4, well actually 3 since no one uses the one in Emma's room, but each bathroom has different appliances." She told her friend, but upon seeing her gaze, which practically told her she wasn't buying it, she explained. "The bathroom by the pool and sauna has a steam shower and cold plunge. The main one here has a regular shower and is quite small, well, compared to the others, but we mostly use that to get ready for night outs. The one upstairs has a Roman-style bathtub, enough for 3 people."

"Who was this house made for again?" May questioned, trying to wrap her head around just how fancy the bathroom in this place seemed to be.

"For her uncle, I think he is a lawyer or something." Jen shrugged her shoulders as she took a sip of her cappuccino with relish.

"Is he like James Bond's lawyer or something?" She questioned after spotting the outdoor gym and swimming pool from the floor-to-ceiling window.

Jenna nearly choked on her drink, coughing into her hoodie sleeve as a surprised laugh escaped. "Honestly, wouldn't even be surprised. All I know is that he got his degree here before doing a doctorate at Harvard. From what Emma told me; he could have graduated after the 1st year but remained for all three getting his MBA."

"Wow, that's like major nerd alert, but why stick around for an extra two years if he was just going to transfer to Harvard anyway?" She questioned, now genuinely interested to hear the thought process of someone dubbed a genius.

"Because you don't go to a school like Cambridge and Harvard for an education which you could get anywhere else in the world. You're here for the connections you can make." Startled by the voice behind her May quickly turned to see the smiling face of Emma behind her. "Good to know you're alive, had us worried for a while there."

Chapter 510 510 Excommunicado

May blinked as she took in the sight of her childhood best friend, standing barefoot on the stairs in plaid pyjama bottoms and a University of Cambridge hoodie that looked at least two sizes too big. "Emma..." she whispered, her throat suddenly tight.

But Emma didn't give her time to finish. In a few quick steps, she crossed the space and pulled May into a long, silent hug. It was firmer than Jenna's earlier one, almost to the point of squeezing the air out of her lungs, but she didn't complain. They stayed like that for a few moments, neither of them willing to end the moment, but like all things, it must come to an end.

"I'm sorry," May murmured into Emma's shoulder, her voice cracking just a little.

"Me too," Emma replied, remembering the fallout she had with her friend after her brother mustered up the stones to spill what he had overheard. They stayed in the hug for a few moments before finally pulling apart after overhearing Jenna's not-so-subtle cough.

Awkwardly pulling apart, Emma gave her a soft smile. "It's good to see you, it's been too long, I was starting to feel withdrawals. If you had let us know you were coming, we could have prepared a room for you."

"Do you want me to leave and come back so you can get ready?" May asked in a joking tone, her hand moving to her suitcase as if she was ready to leave.

"That's not such a bad idea, we would just need to wipe your memories of the mess you've already seen. Don't worry, a good whack should do it, I've seen it on Tom and Jerry," Jen chimed in from across the kitchen island, holding a frying pan which neither of the two had seen her take out.

May instinctively shrank back as Emma blinked in surprise, her sleepy mind trying to catch up. "Jen... why do you even have that out right now?"

The girl sent them a wide, harmless smile before loudly slamming the pan down on the cooker. "I was going to make eggs," she said innocently, though the mischievous glint in her hazel eyes told a different story. "But then again, I wouldn't mind putting that Tom & Jerry logic to the test."

May snorted. "Okay, well, I'd like to keep my skull uncracked, thanks. This brain might be just above average, but god gave me good looks for a reason."

Emma chuckled and waved her over. "And what a pretty head it is, though if you don't hop in the shower, your scent will start attracting the bacon."

May was confused for a second, even raising her arms to smell herself, but couldn't quite make sense of her friend's words. "Oi, I don't smell, wait, do I? Be honest, Jen?"

"Hahah, I plead the fifth, but if I were you, I'd make a beeline for the bathroom and use up some of Emma's expensive shampoos and bath bombs." Jen joked mid-laugh before proceeding to turn on the gas stove, acting totally uninterested in her friend's mental state.

"You guys are the worst... and where is that fakackter bathroom?" May exclaimed, her cheeks puffing in indignation as she stomped her boots on the marble floor.

"Second floor, fourth door on the right", both girls quickly explained, sounding as if they had practised that for hours just to be in sync. May didn't bother with them anymore as she carried her bag up the spacious carpet-laden stone stairs.

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"So, are you ever going to tell me what happened between you two over Christmas?" Jen asked as she placed the last of the bacon into the designated serving bowl before closing the lid that kept the warmth in.

By now, the living room had been cleaned up, and the glass dining table had been decked. Different types of food decked the long table from the small yoghurt stand on the left end to the hot food in the middle, and a more traditional bread section at the end with a fresh batch of bread rolls and pretzels. They made an effort to have a big breakfast every Monday, switching out who would prepare it each time.

"I don't know what you're talking about..." Emma tried to say but stopped mid-sentence as she felt Jenna's eyes lock onto her.

"Don't give me that BS, May doesn't just go off the grid for almost a month over a small misunderstanding. Now, Liv and I have been patient, giving you guys your space, but we deserve to know what is going on in our friend group." Jen retorted, her voice rising slightly with each word as her petite figure gave off the aura of a principal.

Emma sighed, her shoulders sagging under the weight of the question. She stood frozen for a moment near the kitchen counter, hands resting on the edge of the sink, her expression conflicted. The morning light poured through the tall sash windows, illuminating the tension between them.

"I honestly just overheard Rakim talking to Zeus about it and got caught up in this mess." Emma finally muttered, not looking up. "It's not my place to tell you, though you will have to wait for May to do that,"

"Fine, but one of you better start talking, and fast, I'm way too busy with my UNI workload to tiptoe over a minefield," Jen complained as she placed the scrambled eggs into their own serving bowl. "Let's get washed up and wake the twins for breakfast."

Emma gave a short nod and pushed herself away from the counter, grabbing two sets of cutlery as a distraction. "Alright. But you're on twin duty. I'm not getting caught in another one of their sleep-paralysis-murder stares."

Jenna rolled her eyes but chuckled. "Deal. But if I get slapped with a pillow again, I'm throwing Hailey's organic protein powder out the window."

Emma smirked. "She'd declare you excommunicado and send a certain British special agent to finish you off."

"Oh, please, he'd go running for cover the moment he heard the name Wick," Jenna retorted with a light laugh and quickly disappeared up the stairs to rouse the house's infamous "twins"—not actual siblings, but Hailey and Maddie (Madison), where always together to the point people thought they were attached to the hip. The fact that they both majored in mathematics and computer science didn't help to dispel the rumours.

[10min later]

All the girls were gathered around the glass tables in their respective seats. Hailey, a petite brunette standing at 5'7 same height as Jenna, had her hair tied into a messy bun, letting two loose strands frame her face. Her eyes were a shade of light brown, which matched her cute facial features.

Maddie sat next to her and unlike her self-selected twin, she had fiery ginger hair which flowed in curls like a lion's mane. She was gifted with a symmetrical oval facial structure with high cheekbones and a pair of sharp, sea-glass green eyes. Maddie was slightly taller than Hailey at around 5'9 with an immaculate posture that was inherent in her very being.

The two were silently buttering rolls and sipping their protein smoothies in perfect sync like an unspoken ritual. They gave May polite nods when she sat down across from them, barely acknowledging the fact that the girl hadn't been there last night. May didn't feel offended as she knew that this was their default setting until their blood sugar levels reached an acceptable threshold.

Emma sat at the head of the table, pouring herself a cup of peppermint tea. May sat to her left, fresh-faced from the shower and wearing a TitanFit hoodie that nearly swallowed her whole. She looked better, less haunted, more grounded than when she had arrived, but there was still a subtle tension in her posture.

Jenna, now placing the final pitcher of OJ on the table, slid into the last open seat. "Alright, troops. Monday breakfast briefing is in session."

"You know, kids our age just text using your voice is just so 2015," Hailey absent-mindedly retorted as she bit into her roll, savouring the sweet taste of blueberry jam.

Emma raised an eyebrow, her mug halfway to her lips. "Says the girl who has a sticker on her laptop that reads 'I miss 2012 Tumblr.'"

Hailey didn't even blink. "Because Tumblr was a cultural movement, not a communication tool."

That earned a soft snort from Maddie, who reached for the avocado bowl. "You're not wrong. But seriously, Jen, what's the briefing this time? Are we voting on who's doing the dishes or declaring war on our pervy neighbours?"

Jen leaned forward, elbows on the table like a war general about to lay down her master plan. "Neither. We need to decide where we will host the back-to-semester kickback."