

## Football 511

Chapter 511 511 Kickback & Kick-off

[Glebe Road, Cambridge, Cambridgeshire, Emma's Crib | 26/01/2020 | Time: 16:50]

The bass from the garden speakers pulsed through the floorboards like a second heartbeat. The unmistakable smell of grilled halloumi and spiced chicken wafted in through the open patio doors, mingling with laughter, spilt cider, and the clean citrus of Emma's favourite diffuser trying desperately to keep up. The living room was lit by the golden wash of the setting sun spilling through the large sash windows and the flickering colours from a disco light one of the twins insisted on setting up.

Students similar in age could be seen mingling around the house, catching up with friends after their winter break. They needed an excuse to decompress, reconnect, and show off new fits after a month away. Students from different friend groups that spanned over to nearby colleges spilt across the sleek couches and hardwood floors, red cups in hand, while others danced or debated about whose sports car was the best.

A shorter Asian man around the age of 20, dressed in a Cambridge cardigan, could be seen comparing his Richard Millie RM88 with another boy. "Oh, this little thing (KA-CHOW), this light, my old man got me this acing last semester's exams. Something about how the value of my brain should be reflected on my wrist,"

"Boy, you know that my boy Jho low got that bread, don't even test my boy," his friend exclaimed, dressed in an outfit that screamed money from head to toe. "Show them the picture of you and Leo at the Grammys."

Before the debate could escalate into a full-blown "my billionaire dad could beat up your billionaire dad" contest, a familiar voice cut through the hum of party chatter.

"Yo, Emma!" Emma turned from the drink station where she was refilling a bottle of sparkling elderflower to see two familiar faces pushing through the crowd—Miles and Zak, second-year Econ and computer students from King's College, both known for their obsession with football, overpriced sneakers, and their endless supply of parties.

"Tell me you've got ESPN set up," Zak pleaded, his eyebrows raised with urgency. "Leverkusen kicks off in ten minutes and I am \*not\* watching it on some dodgy stream with Polish commentary again."

Miles nodded, already pulling his phone out. "We brought the Chromecast. Just in case."

Emma blinked. "It should be on the stick? Wait, is it that time already?"

Emma's eyes widened as she glanced at the wall clock above the bookshelf—16:50. "Oh crap. It is that time," she muttered, handing off the elderflower to a girl waiting behind her and heading straight for the flat screen mounted on the wall. "Jenna! Take the music outside! We've got a match to stream!"

Across the room, Jenna caught mid-laugh with a guy from Med School, gave a salute and ducked behind the kitchen bar where a control panel hung. She selected the speakers outside, pairing them with the laptop that was playing the Spotify playlist as she let the TV connect with the speakers in the living room area. A collective groan of protest rose from the people, but cheers quickly followed as they heard the music resume outside.

Emma navigated around the Amazon sticks portal page and immediately found the ESPN sports app, locating the Bundesliga live section in moments. Selecting the Leverkusen VS Dusseldorf match, it quickly came to life, showcasing both teams' players in the midst of singing the national anthem.

A hush—even if only a relative one—settled over the living-room crowd as ESPN's Bundesliga feed snapped into focus. On-screen, the BayArena choreography shimmered red and black; in Emma's lounge, bodies jostled for floor cushions, sofa arms, beanbags, anything with a line of sight. The garden playlist thumped faintly through brick and glass, but inside it was Derek Rae's brogue that held court.

"A damp January evening on the banks of the Rhine, and Bayer Leverkusen know how important these three points are after narrowly securing a draw against relegation side Paderborn in their last match.

May lowered herself onto a beanbag, TitanFit hoodie inches from a bowl of tortilla chips. When the camera panned the Leverkusen XI, she caught her breath: Rakim stood in line, gaze focused, but it was his hair that caught her attention. Half his waves bleached blond, little black stars making up a bigger one carved into his left fade. On the opposite side, where his hair remained black, three blond claw stripes were marked out.

"Dang, your brother looks like he jumped right out of the Alex Hunter game." Zak laughed, as the boys present started to reminisce about the days when game companies made an effort to create story modes each year.

"All right—everyone sit down, they are about to kick off," Emma ordered, remote in hand as the players took their positions.

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[18:00 German Time | Bay Arena, Leverkusen | Bayer Leverkusen vs Dusseldorf]

(Fweeeeet)

"We're underway here at the Bayern, Ladies and Gentlemen, hold on to your bratwurst as this derby clash promises to be an action-packed encounter." Derek Rae said into the mic just as Hennings Dusseldorf's striker knocked the ball back to his midfielders.

Taylor Twellman, his ESPN counterpart part did his part in keeping the conversation going. "Given the proximity of both clubs, it's no wonder that this rivalry emerged on both corporate and fan levels."

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On-screen, Düsseldorf's kick-off immediately turned into a spell of high pressing, much to the delight of the away fans. Sobottka harasses Demirbay near the centre circle, not allowing the midfielder to get into their rhythm. For the opening minutes, they very much dominated the match and were able to work their first real chance in the 7th minute.

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Morales spotted Thommy on the left flank making a diagonal run towards the box and didn't hesitate. Spinning onto Havertz's weaker foot, he unleashed a defence-splitting through ball through the home team. The away fans jumped to their feet in anticipation as Thommy managed to beat the offside trap, catching the ball just as he stepped into the box.

He took a touch to adjust his speed and size up a shooting angle as Hrádecký came rushing out. "Hrádecký to the rescue," Rae loudly exclaimed as the keeper somehow managed to get an elbow to the ball, deflecting it over the bar.

"He did everything right from his run to his hit to the far corner, but Lucas Hrádecký rose to the challenge." Taylor explained as a replay of the actions that led up to the goal was shown on the screen. "Hrádecký does not look happy, but can you blame him? That was far too easy for Dusseldorf to make it into his box."

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Leverkusen finally punched back in the twelfth minute after settling into the game's rhythm. It began with Hrádecký rolling the ball short to Sven Bender, and three slick passes later, the ball was at Havertz's feet just inside the Düsseldorf half. He angled a diagonal thirty-yard switch over Fink's head that dropped perfectly for Diaby on the right touchline.

Diaby cushioned in with his instep before immediately accelerating down the flank past Suttner. He managed to whip in a wicked cross past the outstretched leg of the opposing left-back. The ball flew along the six-yard box at its apex before curling back outward. Volland and Ayhan lunged forward feet first, but neither of them managed to get a glimpse of the ball's shadow.

It looked like it would harmlessly fly out of the box, but then a figure dressed in crimson red ghosted into the area between Hoffmann and his team's right-back Zimmermann. Aligned with the penalty spot, Rakim pivoted on his right foot, balancing on his tippy toes as he let the ball pass by the front of his body.

(Bang) In the next moment, his left foot whipped around, catching the ball in the centre, and catapulted it goalward. Time seemed to warp as the ball rocketed off Rakim's left boot, travelling like a tracer round. Kastenmeier, in between the sticks, reacted quickly, hands fully outstretched, trying to reach the swerving ball.

The shot was too violent, though and had too much velocity as it curved past his fingertips. (Bang) A second later, the ball reverberated on the underside of the crossbar, before smashing into the back of the net, detonating the BayArena. Kastenmeier crashed to the ground as bear pitchers were thrown into the air, as the home team's jubilation resounded.

Chapter 512 512 Let Me Return The Favour

[18:13 German Time | Bay Arena, Leverkusen | Bayer Leverkusen 1 vs 0 Dusseldorf]

"OH MY—!" Derek Rae's voice cracked half a register. "Rex with an absolute missile!"

On the screen, Rakim raced off to the corner flag, sliding on his knees, and he did a quick salute with his left hand before springing back onto his feet. Facing their fans at the corner flag, he stood there, his arms spread wide as he stood there for a few moments before nodding at the camera.

In Emma's lounge, tortilla chips were scattered as Miles and Zak exploded off the sofa. "What a hit, lad!" Miles bellowed, slapping the leather sofa as he came down from his celebratory high.

"Bro, you are just happy that your bet panned out, sit down," Zak exclaimed yanking his friend back on the sofa so he would stop goofing around.

Hailey, still half-asleep, on Maddie's shoulder, blinked at the replay and murmured, "Physics checks out."

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The restart was frenetic. Düsseldorf tried to shake off the shock of that thunderbolt by hemming Leverkusen with relentless attacks. They relentlessly attacked the flanks with their midfielders peppering long diagonals toward their wide men. It almost paid off in the 16th minute: Skrzybski ghosted outside Wendell to collect a through ball from Zimmermann and zipped a cross through the six-yard corridor.

Hrádecký gambled, flinging himself forward into traffic, pawing the ball clear a half-second before Hennings could poke home. The BayArena roared its approval, drowning out the groans of disbelief from the visiting side. "A showstopper moment from the keeper," Taylor Twellman noted as the replay froze on the Finn's outstretched fingertips. "He's earned his W tonight, but his defenders leave much to be desired for."

"Indeed, that Leverkusen defence is leaking from all sides, and if they don't tighten up, this could unfold terribly," Rae noted as the play on the screen continued to unfold. After Hrádecký's save, Tah's clearance followed, but they were unable to launch a direct counter.

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What followed was a back-and-forth of positional warfare with neither of the two teams willing to give an inch. Leverkusen dominated possession but struggled to find the killer pass through Düsseldorf's compact midfield block. Havertz dropped deeper, trying to connect with his teammates as they slowly widdled at their opponents.

It was hard as a couple of times when they lost the ball, they found themselves on the wrong side of a Düsseldorf counter. However, their defensive line seemed to have remembered how to do their job

after being chewed out by Peter Bosz on the sidelines. In the 26th minute, Thommy skipped past Diaby on the flank, curving inwards as Lars stepped up to meet him.

Under the experienced captain's pressure, he was forced to attempt a long-range pop, which fizzled into nothing, comfortably ending up in Hrádecký's gloves. In the 30th minute, Leverkusen won a free kick from 30 yards out after Rakim found himself on the wrong end of a sliding tackle. Havertz and Demirbay stepped up to take it, waving Rakim off who stood a couple of yards on the flank, ready to receive a short pass to deliver a cross.

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Pulling a defender down the flank, Demirbay didn't glance his way, though, delivering an in-swinging cross into the box. His cross arced viciously and flat to the apex of the six-yard box. Jonathan Tah climbed highest, shrugging Ayhan aside and thundered a header that seemed goal-bound—until Kastenmeier clawed it off the line at full stretch, the ball smacking the inside of the keeper's left wrist and ricocheting against the post.

A forest of legs hacked, stabbed, whiffed at the ball, but it was finally Hoffmann who hoofed it clear. "Brilliant reflexes from Kastenmeier!" Rae exclaimed as the replay showed the keeper's desperate dive in slow motion. "That was destined for the back of the net until he got a fingertip on it!"

Back in Emma's lounge, May leaned forward, clutching a throw pillow. "Come on, just one more!" she muttered, eyes glued to the screen as Leverkusen maintained their pressure. Her hands would tightly clutch her phone whenever Rakim got on the ball or Dusseldorf got a goal-scoring opportunity.

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The game's tempo shifted as Düsseldorf began sitting deeper, content to absorb pressure and hit on the break. Rakim was becoming increasingly isolated on the left flank, as their opponents got used to his movements. It was one thing seeing his movements during video sessions, but actually having to defend them was another story.

More than being fast, it was his first step and acceleration that often left them lagging behind. Zimmermann and Ayhan had opted to double up on him whenever he touched the ball. Using a combination of zonal and man marking, they limited his creative impact on the attacking end.

But the young winger's persistence was paying dividends, he was drawing fouls, making them work for every inch. By now both were drenched in sweat, their breathing more laboured than it should have been. In the 37th minute, Rakim collected a pass from Baumgartlinger near the touchline, flicking it lightly across his body as Zimmermann closed in.

Before the Düsseldorf right-back could compute what was happening, he executed a beautiful drag-back. Spinning around the defender, he collected the ball that had slipped through his legs to a chorus of excited cheers from nearby fans. "Ups, close your legs," Rae exclaimed as Zimmermann lunged to recover, but Rakim was already gone—two rapid touches launched him to the edge of the box, forcing Ayhan to step up.

He didn't try to beat him, though, as he swung his right foot, sending a chipped ball into the box. Ayhan tried to jump, but the ball sailed way over his head, drawing a rainbow-like arc as it spun towards the area in front of the back. The chip floated over everyone's head, gravity teasing it into the heart of the six-yard box.

Diaby came racing in, beating his man for speed, slipping in front of the recovering midfielders. Lunging forward headfirst, he connected with the ball, redirecting it downward and towards the goal. Kastenmeier had no chance of reaching it despite doing his best to hustle across his line at Olympic pace.

The header bounced hard off the turf, smacked the inside of the post and nestled into the back of the net. "GOAL! 2–0 BAYER LEVERKUSEN!" Derek Rae exclaimed as pandemonium ensued for a second time. "Rakim said let me return the favour, and picked him out with a beauty of an assist. Taylor, I don't even know how he managed to see him from that angle."

Taylor Twellman was already laughing through his reply. "I don't either, Derek! Maybe it's a gift from god or simply luck, but what matters is that Moussa Diaby was able to finish it off." He replied as he went on to analyse what led up to the play. "This winger link-up is one we were all wondering about since the start of the season. Diaby sat out due to injury, and Rakim left for Poland almost the moment he returned, but if this is an indication of what's to come, then the Bundesliga has a problem."

On-screen, Diaby was mobbed by teammates near the corner flag, Rakim still on his back, waving his arms vigorously in celebration. In the BayArena, the ultras were bouncing now, the roar from the Südtribüne resonating in the arena. Flags waved, red smoke curled through the stands, and a drumline pounded beneath the chants of "Number 19 Moussa DIABY!"

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The match resumed on a chipper note with the fans merely chanting their teams' songs. Many could be seen waving their flags or wrapping their arms over their neighbours. Despite the cheery mood when the ESPN cameras cut to the sideline, Peter Bosz stood still, arms folded, lips pressed into the barest of smiles as he watched the match unfold.

Their visitors didn't seem to want to risk conceding another goal and entered full survival mode. The home side also seemed content with the status quo, focusing on possession rather than forcing another attack. The midfield triangle of Havertz, Demirbay, and Baumgartlinger calmly recycled possession, dictating the flow, only initiating probing attacks.

The fans didn't mind. The BayArena was theirs to enjoy tonight—two goals up, and their stars were shining. In the end, 2 long-range attempts from Demirbay and Rakim that didn't amount to much were all they could muster. Dusseldorf managed to launch a counter in the last minute, which saw Hennings beating the last man with a through ball from Morales.

He seemed destined for a one-on-one, but Tah came in clutch, his slide tackle so vicious and clean that he clamped down on the ball at the striker's feet. He fell forward into the box, calling for a free kick, but Tah didn't wait to hear the verdict, springing up to clear the ball up the flank. Lucky for him, the whistle stayed down with no amount of pleading, managing to change referee Daniel Schlager's mind.

(Fweet, Fweet,)"Well, there you have it, folks, in match-week 19, the first-half clash between Leverkusen and Dusseldorf ends in a 2:0 victory for the visitors." Derek Rae's voice resounded through the surround system speakers at Emma's house as the camera panned over the players promptly making their way off the field. "Taylor, what do you make of the first half?"

Chapter 513 513 Were On A Break

[Glebe Road, Cambridge, Cambridgeshire, Emma's Crib | 26/01/2020 | Time: 17:47]

Taylor Twellman's voice came through, still buzzing with excitement. "Well, Derek, it's been one-way traffic from the opening whistle. They put a stamp on this match early and never looked back, one goal, one assist, and a whole lot of headaches for Düsseldorf's backline are Rakim's and Diaby's contributions to the match. Honestly, it could be three or four if not for Kastenmeier playing out of his mind."

On-screen, Rakim slung an arm around one of the coach's shoulders and seemed to be discussing something with him as they walked into the tunnel. Emma muted the TV with a quiet tap of the remote as life came back to those who had been glued to the screen for most of the hour. "Yo, Emma, your brother can really ball," Zak shouted, bouncing up from the sofa, stretching his body as if he had sat there for years.

"Yeah, yeah," Miles groaned, flinging a cushion at him, not giving Emma a chance to respond. "Still doesn't make your fantasy team any less tragic."

"Shut up, you're just grumpy, your bet fell through, who in their right mind bets on the goalie scoring in the first half?" Zak retorted with a bright smile as he walked off to the bathroom like a man who had just won the lottery. "Hahah, just because the odds are 500/1, don't mean you gotta take the long shot, especially since your accumulation was spot on, plus it's not like you broke,"

"Shut up, who complains about the chance to earn 500 bags in one bet?" Miles complained as he followed after him, their conversation quickly disappearing as music began playing in the living room again.

"Girls, let's do shots to wipe the last 45 minutes from my mind," Maddie hollered as she proceeded to interlock her arms with Jenna and Hailey, dragging them to the kitchen island. Emma and May quickly followed, still debating whether to stop the ginger girl or simply concede to her whims.

A short while later, the kitchen island became alive with laughter and clinking shot glasses. Maddie had lined up an aggressive row of tequila slammers while Jenna searched for lime wedges. "Alright," Maddie declared, raising her voice over the music, "one for Moussa, one for Rakim, one for my mental stability!"

"Those are going to run out fast," Hailey deadpanned, lifting her phone to check the Bundesliga live stats app. Emma leaned against the marble counter, pouring a shot for herself only to see May hold out a glass. "Are you crazy? You don't drink," she exclaimed, half shouting her voice travelling over the music, causing the rest of the girls to pay attention.

Emma didn't care about their nosy stares as she continued eyeing her friend's quiet expression. May gave a little shrug, eyes momentarily drifting toward the muted TV, where the halftime show was looping highlights. "Might as well," she said softly. "It's not like I've got a reason not to."

She hesitated, watching May closely as she handed her the glass. For a second, it looked like May might change her mind. But instead, she tapped it against Emma's, downed it in one go, and exhaled sharply. "Wow, that's bitter. What? Are we celebrating or what?"

"Sure, to the hottest freshman at Cambridge," Maddie exclaimed after barely spending a moment debating whether she wanted to step into the minefield between the two friends. "Whoo! Cheers to Brexit,"

"Cheers to Brexit?" Hailey loudly repeated, earning bouts of cheers from those who overheard as they all took a swig of their drink. "Maddie, what are we even doing?"

"We're celebrating that they managed to put that ball into the metal box," Maddie replied with exaggerated glee, already pouring another round. "Though I still don't understand why that's a good thing, surely Rugby is a more intense sport, right? I almost fell asleep watching this."

Before anyone could roast Maddie for her war crime of a sports take, the muted television drew their attention again. The halftime pundits had transitioned from tactical overlays to aesthetic replays—one clip frozen mid-frame as the camera zoomed in on Rakim's profile. His rendition of X's hair colour in waves format shimmered under the BayArena's floodlights as he swung his left boot in a thunderous side volley.

"Okay, seriously," Maddie said, leaning over the counter and pointing at the screen. "Does he have, like, a contract with MJB or something? How does someone look that good after sweating so much?"

"Yeah, May," Hailey chimed in, her curiosity sharpened by tequila. "What's it actually like—dating someone that talented and famous? At his age?"

The girls all turned towards the peach-blond, who now had a light blush due to the alcohol or lack thereof over the years. To the girls, the music felt quieter somehow as they awaited the girl's response. Her voice came out slightly raspy, but clear enough for them to understand her. "It was surprisingly normal, but we're on a break now."

She didn't wait for her friends to internalise her words as she immediately downed the contents of her cup and walked off, heading for the stairs. The atmosphere quickly turned awkward with the four girls left standing in stunned silence. "Maybe tequila wasn't such a good idea," Maddie muttered under her breath, finally breaking the silence between them.

"Oi, shut up, let's get you some water before you set off another minefield," Hailey said, directly dragging her by the arm, with the girl barely fighting her attempt, likely also trying to escape the awkward atmosphere.

"Emma, be honest now, did you know?" Jen asked her tone sounding more worried than accusatory with a hint of hurt.

Emma's head snapped her way so quickly that she almost received a dose of whiplash. "What, of course not, if we did, would we have let Rakim return to Germany on his own after what happened on New Year's?"

"Sorry, you guys have just been keeping so many secrets, I can't help but feel left out again," Jen quickly apologised as she placed a hand on Emma's shoulder. "Let's go check on her, no matter what happened between them, we need to be there for our friend."

"It's ok, and honestly, this whole situation just needs to end, and I can't believe Rakim didn't tell me about this. Though that does explain some of his behaviour of not wanting to talk about May at all, I just chalked it up to him being stressed." Emma muttered in response as she started to rethink some of the conversations when she tried to check in on him.

"That would explain that Emo ass haircut he got. I didn't want to say it, but that would explain a lot." Jen muttered to herself, but with Emma's proximity, she heard her clearly. Doing her best to hold back her laughter as she glanced over to the screen where the players were just jogging back out onto the field. "Let's go check on her, she should have had enough time to calm down for a bit."

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[19:00 German Time | Bay Arena, Leverkusen | Bayer Leverkusen 2 vs 0 Dusseldorf]

[46]

"And we are back underway here in Leverkusen. The hosts have a commanding 2–0 lead over Düsseldorf," Rae said, "but with Funkel's men making a tactical tweak during the break, they'll be hoping to snatch one back quickly."

Twellman added, "They've pushed Skrzybski higher up the pitch, more like a second striker alongside Hennings. It's a gamble, but one they have to take."

The camera panned across the BayArena as the second half kicked off under floodlights that shimmered against the January chill. Since it was their turn to kick off, Leverkusen were back in possession almost immediately. They didn't rush to attack, instead choosing to calmly play out from the back.

Dusseldorf came out roaring to fight as they surged forward, playing more aggressively. Under Hennings' charge, Tah was quickly forced to tap it short to Sven, who sprayed a crisp pass wide to Wendell. The left-back didn't get the chance to think as Skrzybski was upon him, forcing him to send it high up the flank.

Wendell's clearance hung in the air like a dying star, awkwardly, spinning, as Rakim turned to face it, ready to nod it inwards to Volland. He never got the chance, though, as a robust figure gripped his shoulder using him as a springboard to catapult himself over him. "Zimmermann may have won that aerial duel, but whether he will get away with it is for Sir Daniel Schlage to decide."

Chapter 514 514 A Bit Of Swagger

[19:00 German Time | Bay Arena, Leverkusen | Bayer Leverkusen 2 vs 0 Dusseldorf]

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Zimmermann's heavy-handed leap sent Rakim stumbling forward, roughly landing on the turf. The referee, Daniel Schlage, paused for a moment, hand twitching toward his whistle, but then let play continue, waving it off as incidental contact. Prompting rakim to raise his arms in protest followed by a bout of boos by the home fans.

"Zimmermann's lucky there to the dismay of the home fans," Derek Rae commented, as the crowd erupted in louder jeers and whistles. "Nine out of ten times, that's called for climbing."



"I get wanting to set a tone early in the half," Twellman said, "but you don't need to launch off someone's spine like it's the Bundesliga dunk contest."

The ball, meanwhile, dropped perfectly to the feet of Morales, who used his body to get in Havertz's way as he let it roll to Fink. The midfielder nudged it forward before slotting the ball up the left flank past the outstretched feet of Demirbay. Tommy received the ball with his back to Bender, using his body to hold the Leverkusen right back off.

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Tommy turned sharply, rolling the ball with his studs before spinning off Bender's shoulder. A subtle nudge helped him create just enough separation to whip in a curving low cross forward, aiming toward the near post. Hennings had anticipated the ball and darted past Tah with a clever diagonal run, catching the big centre-back slightly flat-footed.

Hennings reached the ball in stride, and with barely a glance up, met it first-time with the inside of his left boot. The contact was clean, sending the ball skimming just inches above the slick turf. Hrádecký instinctively dropped low, extending both arms and managed to smother the effort at the base of his near post.

"That's brilliant anticipation from Hrádecký!" Derek Rae exclaimed. "He might have just saved Leverkusen from a sure goal."

Twellman added, "That's elite shot-stopping instinct, Derek. Most keepers react late or spill that kind of chance. He got down so fast and held onto it, an absolute masterclass from Finn."

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Despite being rattled by the near goal, the home side didn't take their foot off the gas. Despite starting off with the mindset of slowing the game down, they found themselves subconsciously adapting to Dusseldorf's fast pace. Given that they are a team that naturally plays at a higher pace, it wasn't much of a problem given the effort their opponents put in.

The middle third of the pitch became the busiest part of the pitch with the midfielders battling for possession. With how their formation was set out, Fink and Morales found themselves perfectly mirrored by Leverkusen's two holding midfielders. Havertz found himself in a similar situation in the 10 role as Marcel Sobottka acted as bodyguard.

Still absorbing Dusseldorf's pressure, Leverkusen found themselves coming out on top more than not. However, after a certain point, they began to seek a release valve. In the 52-minute, Baumgartlinger swept the ball across to Demirbay, who paused with it near the halfway line, after spinning by a defender.

Taking a second to scan the field, he spotted Rakim peeling into space on the left, not hesitating, he clipped a curling ball diagonally over the midfield congestion. Rakim took it down with a velvet touch, using his momentum to nudge the ball over the recovering Zimmermann, who came to a sliding stop in front of him.

"You need another hand, old man, you look a little winded there," Rakim said to the fullback in front of him after deftly touching the ball down. "I'm going to nutmeg you."

Before Zimmermann could even react, Rakim's left foot flashed over the ball in a step over as his right performed a reverse elastico. In panic, the full-back shut his legs, inadvertently letting the ball pass him by towards the byline. Rakim didn't wait and exploded from his spot, speeding after the ball.

"Oh, that's way too easy, Ayhan providing cover from the centre though," Twellman commented into the mic as Rakim looked like he would dribble into the box. However, instead of trying to beat the nearing Ayhan, he abruptly chopped the ball to his right with the side of his boot as he stepped back.

"Back and through his legs, we've seen this sequence of events before. Can he put the nail in the coffin, though?" Derek excitedly exclaimed as the ball rolled through Zimmermann's open legs just as he was hustling to recover.

Dodging his stride, Rakim used his long legs to side-step him and latch onto the ball again. Without hesitation, he bent a vicious cross into the box with his right, aiming for Volland. The striker had lost one of his markers with Ayhan moving to provide cover. Instead of standing still, he had switched positions with Diaby, allowing him to circle back to attack the area around the back post.

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Volland sensed the opportunity. As the ball whipped through the air, he readjusted his body shape, held off the late-arriving Hoffmann with a subtle push using his back, and powered forward with a low leap. With exquisite timing, he met the cross just before the ball could dip too far, snapping his neck to drive a header downward.

It pierced the goal like a dart, leaving Kastenmeier glued to his line, unable to react as the ball rattled the bottom corner of the net. "GOAL! Volland buries it with authority," Derek Rae shouted over the stadium's eruption. "It's three for Leverkusen, and that might be curtains for Düsseldorf!"

Taylor Twellman's voice cut in, "You can't teach that some strikers just got that killer instinct, and Volland extends his scoring streak." The BayArena vibrated with the bouncing of fans who exploded out of their seats in jubilation. Their roars resounded, letting all their emotions spill out as Volland celebrated his goal at the side.

"That's Volland's eleventh goal of the season," Rae noted. "And that assist from Rakim, his 8th in the Bundesliga. The teenager continues to impress."

[Leverkusen 3:0 Dusseldorf]

[56]

Play resumed with Düsseldorf trying to claw their way back. Funkel's side pushed their lines higher, with Morales and Fink playing riskier vertical passes to catch Leverkusen on the break. Thommy and Skrzybski tried rotating wings, hoping to unsettle Wendell and Bender. If this had been the previous week's Leverkusen, they would have had a fighting chance, but the current home side seemed to have found their swagger.

They were now brimming with confidence, and it showed in the way they moved the ball around their ranks with ease. Even when they lost possession, no one panicked, and they simply executed the defensive drills they had practised. This led to a situation where all three ranks of defenders, midfielders, and strikers dominated their opponents.

In the next ten minutes, the number of shots flying towards the Düsseldorf goal exploded exponentially. By the 66th minute, it became clear that Düsseldorf's defensive shape was unravelling. Their backline began to drop deeper with each Leverkusen possession, but their midfield struggled to compress, leaving open pockets between the lines.

It was in one of these pockets that Havertz got to work using one or two touch passes to connect with nearby teammates. Raising the tempo of their play, they began pressuring their opponents on both flanks, with both holding midfielders stepping up. He received a pass from Baumgartlinger just inside the final third and turned smoothly under pressure.

Looking up for a second, he launched a piercing vertical ball down the right channel. Diaby pounced on it, bursting past Suttner with a shoulder dip that left the fullback chasing his shadow. The French winger surged down the flank and, just before reaching the byline, zipped in a low, fizzing cross toward the penalty spot.

Rakim, having drifted in unmarked from the far side, angled his run perfectly between the centre-backs. But just as he readied to strike, Hoffmann lunged in at full stretch and barely clipped the ball with the toe of his boot, diverting it out of Rakim's stride.

"Ohhh, that was close," Derek Rae intoned. "That was nearly four, and Rakim looked like he was going to bury it."

Taylor Twellman added, "Give credit to Hoffmann. He's had a rough night, but that was a goal-saving intervention. Any misstep and Rakim's already celebrating."

[69]

Panicked at what he was seeing, Finkle immediately made his substitutions. Kownacki replaced Skrzybski on the right flank, Thommy on the left flank, also left the stage for the Ghanaian Ampomah and in midfield, the Austrian Stöger replaced Fink. The substitution received a lukewarm welcome in the BayArena, but the changes prompted Peter Bosz to make some changes.

Demirbay left the stage for Wirtz, shifting the Leverkusen formation from a 4-2-3-1 to a 4-3-3, with Baumgartlinger acting as a holding midfielder. That wasn't the only change he wanted to make, but for now, he decided to wait and see for the next ten minutes. The welcome Wirtz received was not comparable to the opposing players, as a bout of applause rained down upon him and Demirbay.

Chapter 515 515 Bow-Tied & Gift Wrapped

[19:00 German Time | Bay Arena, Leverkusen | Bayer Leverkusen 3 vs 0 Dusseldorf]

[70]

The tempo hardly dipped. Wirtz, only 16, was full of energy and gave the veterans something to worry about. He ragged around the midfield lines like a matador dodging multiple bulls.

He had one of the best techniques on the team, with his first touch being feather-light, allowing him to suddenly explode with speed at a moment's notice. Wanting to impact the game as soon as possible, he exploded into pockets of space whenever an opportunity presented itself. That's why, after receiving a short pass from Baumgartlinger, he turned with the ball's momentum and sped past Stöger before unleashing a weighted pass up the right channel.

Diaby received the ball midstride, doing his best to hold off Ampomah as they broke into the final third. Using his shoulder to nudge the defender, he gained a breath of space and immediately drilled a curving cross into the box.

The ball flew towards the near post, forcing Kastenmeier to jump forward and punch the ball out of his box before Volland could get any funny ideas. "Florian Wirtz has become a mainstay in the first team

since his achievements in Poland, and it's not hard to see why," Derek Rae enthused. "He hasn't even been on the pitch two minutes and is already looking for reasons to keep his name in the team sheet."

Twellman chuckled. "It's like giving a kid the keys to a Ferrari and realising he actually knows how to drive stick."

"Ahem, what does that gotta do with football?" Rae questioned, wondering how his praising Wirtz led to a Ferrari product placement. "Never mind, Dusseldorf is on the counter, Ampomah is tearing down that left flank."

[74]

Ampomah was a blur of red boots on the wet grass. He hurdled Wirtz's sliding challenge on the touchline, let the ball roll ahead of him, and with one last stutter-step to the wrong-footed Lars Bender, he gained space. Without hesitation, he whipped a vicious, waist-high cross toward the penalty spot.

Hennings flashed across Tah's blind side again, meeting the delivery with a glancing header. The connection was true; the ball arced toward the top corner, only for Lukáš Hrádecký, who had been covering the near post, to raise his glove to deflect the ball out of play. He got a good hand to it, managing to keep his goal safe yet again to the delight of the home fans.

A minute later, Ampomah stood at the corner flag, shaking the raindrops out of his hair as the away supporters began a rhythmic clap behind him. They looked for any semblance of redemption, no matter how little and hoped their team could rise to the occasion. Leaving the BayArena, the home of their bitter rivals, in a 3:0 humiliation wasn't something they could live down; they weren't Arsenal fans after all.

Ampomah didn't disappoint as he sent in a vicious inswinger with his right foot, but Wendell rose imperiously at the back edge of the six-yard line, thumping a clearing header that nearly reached the centre circle. The visiting side managed to retain the loose ball, killing any attempts at a counter, but struggled to turn the possession into a worthwhile attack.

[80]

Rakim and Diaby exited the stage in the 80th minute for Leon Bailey and Lucas Alario. They both received a warm welcome send-off for their contributions in today's match. They had both not only scored for the team but also assisted, which the fans who never cared about personal accolades appreciated.

Bailey wasted no time announcing himself, using every opportunity to make an impact in the squad. This season, he had found it hard to hit the ground running, unlike the other wingers in the squad. With 5 wingers in the squad and 2 more players able to confidently play the role, the battle for minutes had been brutal.

Squad rotation helped, but the pressure to deliver was there as he could feel that his role in the squad was getting smaller. The Jamaican took his first meaningful touch just inside his own half in the 83rd minute. He spun on a dime, slipping around his marker, and ripped away down the left touchline like a dragster off the lights.

Zimmermann, who had been used to marking Rakim, who used his skills to miss with acceleration to get by him, tried the same approach with Bailey. It backfired, though, as the winger had no desire to make it look nice and simply tapped into his Jamaican trackster genes. Forced to improvise, Zimmermann tried to jockey him wide, but Bailey's second acceleration was pure lightning.



One step over, then a nutmeg through the full-back's planted legs and he was gone like a teenage boy with sudden fatherly responsibilities. Bailey's afterburners carried him to the byline in the blink of an eye. A sea of red and black scarves rose in expectation. The Jamaican snapped his head up, spotted Alario and Volland charging into the box at pace and drilled a cut-back their way.

Alario met it on the slide, six yards out, but the ball ricocheted wickedly off the slick surface and thundered into the advertising boards instead of the gaping net. A collective gasp rippled around the BayArena.

"Alario had the bow-tied and the gift wrap on," Derek Rae lamented. "He just forgot to attach the postage stamp."

Twellman chuckled. "That's the kind of chance you dream about...and then wake up screaming about when you put it wide."

[86]

Düsseldorf tried to respond with a desperate high press, but every misplaced pass felt like kindling tossed onto Leverkusen's counter-attacking bonfire. Wirtz, who was playing with a happy expression, was the most active; he sent his marker sliding as if he were on skates with a shoulder drop before turning in the opposite direction. Not holding onto the ball, he clipped a cheeky outside-of-the-boot switch to Wendell on the opposite flank.

The left-back cushioned it elegantly and returned the favour inside as Wirtz cut a diagonal run forward. Without even looking at the ball, he received the return pass and used his momentum to pirouette away from Morales. Drawing another defender, he got close before slipping a square ball into Bailey's stride at the top of the D.

Bailey chopped inside Hoffmann, who over-committed and paused just long enough to watch Ayhan slide by like a first-time skater who only bothered to learn how to go forward. With the path cleared, the winger didn't even look up and wrapped his left foot around the ball, sending a sumptuous curler toward the far corner.

Kastenmeier launched himself full-stretch, gloves grazing air. The strike kissed the underside of the bar and bulged the netting with a satisfying thump. "GOOOAAL! Leon Bailey with a work of art!" Rae's voice rose above the roar. "That is an exclamation point the size of the Rhine!"

Twellman whooped. "When you can bend physics to your will like that, you deserve a standing ovation, and he's getting one from almost every corner of this ground."

[Leverkusen 4 – 0 Düsseldorf]

[88]

Bosz, on the sidelines, celebrated the goal like an actor auditioning for the next Creed as he punched the air in joy. He had merely wanted to see what the other players on the bench had to offer, and they did not disappoint. He wasn't the only one celebrating as the rest of the bench had jumped up in joy to celebrate as if it were the game-winning goal.

That proved to be the last noteworthy thing to happen in regular time as the visiting side was utterly defeated. They showed no intentions of attacking, and the Red Lions simply let the match play out. Soon, the fourth official's board flashed 2 minutes. By now, the home supporters were bouncing, chanting their song as if that was the very reason they had come to the Arena.

Düsseldorf produced one last symbolic surge in the 92nd minute: Ampomah fed Kownacki, who dinked a clever ball over the top for Hennings. The striker chested down, but Tah lunged in with a telescopic leg, nicking the ball cleanly and drawing a roar almost equal to a goal. Twellman quickly commented, "That's a centre-back's equivalent of a mic-drop."

[90+2]

Referee Daniel Schlage checked his watch, then delivered three sharp peeps.

[FULL-TIME: Bayer Leverkusen 4 – 0 Fortuna Düsseldorf]

Chapter 516 516 Hoffenheim

[01 / 02 / 2020, Location: PreZero Arena, Sinsheim – Wet 7 °C, swirling wind, Bundesliga, Match-week 20 Hoffenheim vs Bayer Leverkusen]

The week following the decimation of their derby rival went by in a jiffy as the whole club got to work. Since the second month was arguably the most important of the year 2020, they all had high expectations of the results they wanted to achieve. It would be hard as they would fight a 3-pronged battle in the Bundesliga, facing teams like Dortmund, the DFB Pokal and their first round of 16 Champions League clash with Liverpool.

Thus, they got to work with all players, coaches and backroom staff, giving it their all to do their best. On the first of February, the first of their 6 clashes took place in the home of Hoffenheim in the Bundesliga, Match week 20. Wanting to continue their dominant form from their previous week's clash against Dusseldorf, the Red Lions attacked from the first whistle.

[12]

They quickly managed to pressure the home side with their dynamic wing attacks and link-up play. In the 12th minute, they created their first real chance after a sloppy Hoffenheim clearance was gobbled up by Baumgartlinger 35 yards from goal. The holding midfielder promptly passed to Havertz, splitting two defenders.

He let the ball run across his body, before bringing his foot to the ball, threading a needle precisely through ball into the run of Diaby. The Frenchman tore away from Hübner, who proceeded to open his hips and fired a low shot across Baumann into the far corner. "That's surgical, Kai Havertz with a scalpel and Diaby finishes the incision," Derek Rae purrs while the visiting ultras ignite red smoke under the roof.

[Hoffenheim 0 vs 1 Bayer Leverkusen]

[24]

"Oh, that was simply reckless, poor decision-making from Skingraven I wouldn't be surprised if the official shows him red," Robson commented as Hoffenheim's striker took a tumble in the box, clutching his foot following a risky slide tackle from Skingraven. "There was always the possibility of a sending-off, but he will be kicking himself at being forced to call it a day this early."

"I honestly have no words, hopefully, a cold shower will bring some sense into him. There was simply no need for such measures given that Tah was covering the inside and Hardecky isn't exactly a pushover between the sticks." Derek commented, showing no sympathy for the left-back who was now undertaking the walk of shame off the pitch. Most away fans understood why he had done it, but those knowledgeable ones understood that it was not worth going down a man this early.

Three minutes later, after the striker had received medical attention, Hoffenheim captain André Kramarić placed the ball on the penalty spot amid a restless hush that rolled around the PreZero Arena. Skoś set-piece specialist Vogt stood over it first, but Kramarić calmly waved him away, unwilling to delegate this responsibility to anyone else. The wind tugged at his shirttails as Hrádecký spread himself on the goal line, knees flexing lightly as he stood on the heels of his toes, coiled spring at any moment.

The keeper's poker face was on point as he didn't flinch in the slightest, his movement barely noticeable as he stared down the Croatian in front of him. A second later, the whistle shrilled, signalling the go-ahead, but neither of the two protagonists moved, seemingly playing a game of chicken. It was Kramarić who broke the standoff as he strode up, whipping a right-footed strike low to the keeper's left.

Hrádecký guessed correctly, flinging out a strong palm to parry, but the greasy ball skidded straight back into the danger zone. Ihlas Bebou reacted quickest, lunging in front of Tah to stab the rebound over the line from four yards.

"Saved once, not twice," Derek Rae bemoaned. "Hoffenheim level it and Leverkusen's early red card is punished almost instantly."

Steward Robson let out a low whistle. "That's a poacher's finish, and it flips the momentum completely. Down a man, Bosz's side now has a long afternoon ahead."

[Hoffenheim 1 – 1 Leverkusen]

With Daley Sinkgraven already under the stadium showers, Bosz shuffled the deck: Wendell replaced Azhil and slid to left-back, as Volland retreated ten yards to shorten the distance between him and the midfield numbers as the formation morphed into a 4-4-1.

The tactical duct tape stemmed the bleeding just in time for a Hoffenheim set piece 30 yards out. Robert Skov curled a wicked delivery that sliced through the downpour; Hübner rose highest and thundered a header off the crossbar, the frame rattling like a tin roof in a gale before Tah hoofed the rebound clear.

"That bar's still trembling," Rae marvelled. "Leverkusen need to respond and fast."

[45+1]

Just before the break, Leverkusen nearly executed the perfect smash-and-grab. Rakim wriggled free on the left flank, signalling the counter, as he raced up the flank. He chopped inside his marker and rolled a square ball to Havertz. Twenty yards out with the wind at his back, the 20-year-old let fly; the strike swerved wickedly, beating Baumann's glove, only to cannon flush off the inside of the post, skidding along the line before Vogt hacked it away.

Robson inhaled sharply. "Half the stadium thought that was in. Havertz struck it so sweet the raindrops didn't dare touch it."

[HALF-TIME: 1-1]

[57]

Hoffenheim emerged from the break with the purpose of punishing the unruly visitors. It worked as they managed to push the tempo up, culminating in a couple of missed opportunities, and in the 57th minute, they managed to earn a deep free kick near the left touchline. Skov's outswinger had snow on it by the time it dropped, Hübner didn't mind though as he bullied his way through traffic.

He rose highest, beating Tah by a full head, planting a downward header past Hrádecký into the far corner. "Set-piece déjà vu, but this time the bar's not saving Leverkusen," Rae sighed over the home roar.

"Bosz will be furious," Robson growled. "Same runner, same delivery, and finally a result. That's a coaching nightmare."

[Hoffenheim 2 – 1 Leverkusen]

[65]

Bosz no longer able to wait, executed a Double switch in the form of Leon Bailey replacing the exhausted Diaby on the right, and Exequiel Palacios relieved Havertz in the middle. The rain seemed to intensify, sheets of water whipping across the floodlights as Bailey immediately went to work, carving up Kaderábek with two elastic step-overs before earning a free-kick 28 yards from goal.

[73]

Rakim himself stepped up to take it with his hands on his hips as he gazed beyond the wall. His black and blonde hair clung to his head, glistening under floodlights as he waited for the referee's whistle. "Derek, looking at him, he might actually go for it," Steward Robson commented as the referee's whistle resounded in the arena.

"(Fweet) Surely not, especially in this weather, con- OHHH What a goal," Derek tried to respond, only to exclaim in shock as the ball impacted the back of the net.

"The keeper did everything right, but he was simply left outclassed by that strike," Robson intoned as the replay of the shot was shown as Rakim went off to celebrate.

Rakim had struck the ball with the top of his foot, exerting maximum power, sending the ball torpedoing over the ball. It curved over the left side just in time to beat the jumping wall. It looked like it would curve back to the near post, but it suddenly seemed to lose its spin. The keeper, who was already moving across his line, barely managed to glance back as it punctured the top left corner.

[Hoffenheim 2 – 2 Leverkusen]

[80]

With nerves fraying, yellow cards flew: Ayhan for a cynical shirt pull on Bailey, then Kaderábek for striking down Swen near the corner flag. Bailey's ensuing free-kick arced to the penalty spot where Volland thundered a header destined for the roof—Baumann sprawled backwards, fingertips flicking it over with a reaction save worthy of a still frame.

"Baumann's heroics keep things level here at the PreZero Arena," Rae purred.



[88]

Hoffenheim's last gasp came when substitute Munas Dabbur hooked a looping cross toward Kramarić. The striker's attempt at a scissor kick fizzled out spectacularly as he set the ball to the roof of the stadium. Hrádecký barely bothered to act like he was startled as he used his towel next to the goal to dry his gloves.

[90+3]

After 3 minutes of extra time, referee Sven Jablonski drew a soggy line under proceedings. All square in Sinsheim, and despite the man disadvantage, Leverkusen felt like they left points on the table.

[FULL-TIME: Hoffenheim 2 – 2 Bayer Leverkusen]

Chapter 517 517 DFB Pokal Round of 16 Stuttgart

[05 / 02 / 2020, Location: BayArena, Leverkusen – Clear, –1 °C | DFB-Pokal, Round of 16 | Bayer Leverkusen vs VfB Stuttgart]

Despite the first match of February ending in a less-than-ideal draw, the BayArena was sold out for the cup game. The night crackled with excitement from warm-ups to the first whistle as the fans cheered on their players. Peter Bosz rotated only lightly for the Cup game while Pellegrino Matarazzo's second-tier Stuttgart arrived fearless, buoyed by more than six thousand travelling Swabians packed into the North stand.

[12]

Leverkusen were on a mission to put the game away quickly, and they announced their intentions early. Bailey, starting on the right, torched Borna Sosa with a blur of step-overs, earning himself a half-yard and hung an arcing cross toward the penalty spot. Lucas Alario timed his run to perfection as he rose into the air, beating Kempf and Badstuber, and he kept climbing, his hips almost level with Sosa's ear, to smash a header low inside the far post.

"They needed a spearhead to anchor their offence, and he did just that, perfect execution from Lucas Alaric." Derek Rae roared above the din. "The decision to start him is already paying dividends."

[Leverkusen 1 – 0 Stuttgart]

[22]

In the 22nd minute, Stuttgart's first serious foray occurred, producing quite a bit of controversy. Silas Wamangituka spun away from Jonathan Tah near the touchline, and the big defender tugged the shirt just long enough for the winger to hit the turf theatrically. Referee Daniel Schlage produced a yellow card amid Stuttgart's pleas for a red, which quickly received a flood of boos from the home fans.

Robson audibly winced. "Tah's lucky VAR can't upgrade yellows in the Pokal—anywhere else he might be walking." The resulting free kick, whipped in by Didavi, was palmed away authoritatively by Hrádecký, but the gloves were off for both sides.

[31]

Stuttgart struck true in the 31st minute after Wamangituka once again slipped behind the defence. He didn't bother taking a touch to control the ball and fired off a shot first time. The power in the strike was undeniable—an outside-of-the-foot rocket that kissed the inside of the post before bulging the net.

"A moment of silence for Leverkusen's high line," Rae muttered, as the away end exploded. "Silas ruthlessly punishes them, Bosz will have some questions for his back line."

Robson chimed in: "That run came from the blindside again. Same channel. Stuttgart's wide forwards are having a field day isolating the centre-backs."

[Leverkusen 1 – 1 Stuttgart]

[38]

Rather than panic, Leverkusen responded with poise. Demirbay, orchestrating from deep, began taking extra touches to shift Stuttgart's block laterally. He nearly unlocked them in the 38th with a disguised chipped ball into the left channel. Hugging the line, Rakim caught it on his instep and sliced inside Stenzel with an ankle-breaking shoulder feint that saw him explode past his marker.

He tried curling one toward the far post, but Kobel stretched at full extension to claw it away. The BayArena crowd groaned in disappointment but was quick to shout in encouragement. Even though the score was levelled, they could practically sense a goal coming their way.

[43]

It didn't take long for their wishes to come true after a Stuttgart corner was cleared by Lars Bender, launching a quick counter. Every Leverkusen player seemed to explode forward like well-oiled machines, and within three passes, Leverkusen had engineered a goal-scoring opportunity. Wirtz, linked cleverly with Bailey before sending a reverse pass into the run of Rakim, who exploded past the last defender.

One-on-one with Kobel, he remained composed, not panicking in the slightest as he faked a shot. A quick shoulder drop sent the keeper sprawling right, and Rakim dragged the ball left, sneaking past him. Nudging the ball deftly with his left foot, he dodged a sliding defender before comfortably slotting the ball into the empty net.

"At this point, it would be more surprising to see him miss," Rae breathed, almost in disbelief. "He makes that look like a routine finish. It's anything but, keep in mind those are professional players down there."

"Calm as you like," Robson said. "He's 16, but his decision-making under pressure is one of the coldest in the industry."

[Rakim Rex – 44', Leverkusen 2 – 1 Stuttgart]

[58]

The second half began with Stuttgart trying to pull Leverkusen into a scrap after realising the technical disparity between the two sides. Endo and Mangala closed spaces quickly and tried to rattle Wirtz and

Demirbay in midfield. But Leverkusen held strong, and with Adrian stanielwicz acting as an enforcer, things quickly became a pound-for-pound game.

The defensive midfielder understood his assignment, flying into tackles with zero regard for niceties. His defensive instincts in the game were on point; the fact that he had only picked up warnings till now was the best proof. With him anchoring the defence, it gave Wirtz and Demirbay room to manoeuvre in relative peace.

In the 58th, Bailey switched wings with Rakim and received the ball wide left, ghosting past Förster before drawing a foul right on the edge of the box. The defender had misplanted his foot, inadvertently stepping on Leon's foot just as he tried to explode forward.

[59]

Demirbay was the one to orchestrate the set piece, as moments later he stood over the ball eyeing the far corner past the four-man wall. But instead of striking, he disguised a short pass to Wirtz at the top of the D. The Stuttgart defenders in the box immediately scrambled to close him down as the ball rolled its way.

It was too late, though, as the young wunderkind fired a first-time dart towards goal. The ball took flight, narrowly missing the head of one of the onrushing defenders as it homed in on its destination. There was nothing the keeper between the sticks could do as the ball pierced the left side of his net.

The BayArena immediately exploded for its Darling. "GOLAZO! Wirtz with a thunderbolt!" Derek Rae howled over the eruption of cheers. "He asked for it at the top of the D—and delivered like a seasoned sniper."

Robson added, "Sometimes I wonder what kind of luck Leverkusen stumbled into to get two of the hottest wunderkinders in one team. And what a team it is, they look like they could go all the way, barring any misfortunes."

Stuttgart players stood momentarily frozen, but Wirtz didn't care as he sprinted toward the corner flag, arms wide, his face beaming with Joy as teammates mobbed him.

[Florian Wirtz - 59', Leverkusen 3 – 1 Stuttgart]

[64]

Knowing the tie was slipping away, Matarazzo shuffled his deck again, sending on Kalajdzic and Klement to replace the tired legs of Badstuber and Mangala. Stuttgart, with nothing more to lose, switched to an ultra-attacking shape, pushing Sosa higher up the pitch and leaving just three at the back.

Bosz countered immediately, withdrawing Demirbay from the match, who exited to a standing ovation as Charles Aránguiz entered the stage. The introduction of the Chilean brought calmness and structure to the midfield as he supported Adrian stanielwicz. The tempo quickly slowed, as they retained possession despite the visitors' hectic pressing.

The ball circulation sharpened, and they began to toy with the rhythm of the game. From moving the ball around slowly to suddenly increasing the tempo once their opponents got too daring, keeping Stuttgart at bay.

[68]

Rakim, now stationed back on the left flank, found himself in space after Aránguiz pinged a clever diagonal to his feet. With the crowd urging him on, he dipped a shoulder and surged past Stenzel with ease. Bursting into the box, he feigned a cutback but instead rolled the ball through the defender's open legs.

Sneaking past him, he squared the ball across the penalty spot, trying to locate a red jersey. Alario was millimetres away from getting a toe on it at the front post, but the ball zipped just beyond his reach. Bailey, crashing in at the far post, arrived a second late, and the ball trickled across the box untouched. The collective "OHHH!" from the crowd echoed in the rafters.

"That deserved a finish, you don't get a better assist than this," Rae lamented.

"Knowing him, he would have preferred to take the shot himself, but the angle was too tight. Though I bet hell think twice before deciding to pass the ball next time," Robson added.

Chapter 518 518 Vs Borussia Dortmund

The rest of the game unfolded in a show of dominance for the Leverkusen side. They continued to comfortably control the game, launching occasional attacks to keep their opponents at bay. Their opponents didn't take it lying down, launching the occasional counterattack, but most fizzled out the moment they reached the Lions' defensive lines.

Tah seemed to step into the zone as he could be seen everywhere around that back line. Whether it be a late slide tackle, a strong shoulder check, or a real duel, he was there to dominate his opponents. In the 80th minute after a failed Leverkusen attack, Stuttgart launched a counter up the left flank, and in a matter of moments, they reached the final third.

A sharp through ball intended for their striker just as he slipped past Bend saw him crashing to the ground as Tah came sliding in like a wrecking ball. The defender had timed his tackle to perfection, cleanly scooping the ball the moment the striker tried to latch onto it. Moments later in the 86th minute, Tah once again shone, pouncing on the second ball after a brilliant on-the-line save from Hardeckey.

The final piece of action of the game came in the 90+3 minute when a long-range attempt from Alario at the top of the box grazed the side of the left post. Not long after that, the match concluded in a dominant 3:1 victory for the home side, taking them to the quarter-finals of the DFB-Pokal. Celebrations for the win were mellowed down since they had to host Dortmund at the Bay Arena.

After week 20 of the Bundesliga, they comfortably sat in 3rd position, beating Gladbach in goal difference. Their opponents were coming in hot off a 5:0 slaughter of relegation side Union Berlin, and their young talents had now fully integrated with the squad. So, despite relishing their win and entry into the quarterfinals, the challenge to step into the top 3 of the league table was right in front of them.

For Rakim, the 3 days to the game elapsed quickly with recovery sessions, massages and light training. The coaching staff kept things dynamic with positional drills, and of course, most of their time was spent on film sessions with assistant coach Fredrick Bauer. After hours of film sessions analysing Dortmund's current lineup, they concluded that the game plan would be to counter their firepower with more firepower.

The media quickly picked up the story, hyping up the match as one of the great clashes in this season's Bundesliga between two teams at the top of their form. The fact that some of the brightest stars of the Poland Mini-World Cup would likely face each other brought things to another fever pitch. None of this mattered to Rakim, though, as on the day of the game, he took a rough tackle in a pressing drill, leading to a slight knock on his left thigh.



Even though he felt like he could continue after a while of rest, the coaching staff and medical team acted like he had lost his leg. Thus, instead of joining the team on their final pregame routine, he spent in the medical staff doing whatever was asked of him to make sure he was OK.

By 17:30, an hour before the game, the verdict was in: Rakim was cleared to play after wrapping his thigh with athletic tape, but it was recommended that he not start.

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[08 / 02 / 2020, Location: BayArena, Leverkusen – Cloudy, 3°C - 15% chance of rain | Bundesliga match week 21 | Bayer Leverkusen Vs Borussia Dortmund | 18:20]

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Leverkusen Lineup: 3-4-3

GK: 1 Lukas Hardekey

CB: A. Dragovic

CB: S.Bender

CB: J. Tah

LM: D. Skingraven

CM: L. Bender

CM: N. Amiri

RM: K. Bellarabi

LW: M. Diaby

ST: K. Volland

RW: K. Havertz

Coach: Peter Sylvester Bosz

SUB:

Goalkeeper: 28 Ramazan Ozcan

Centre Back: 6 Aleksandar Dragovic

Left Back: 18 Wendell

Right Back: Mitchell Weiser

Defensive Midfielder: 30 Adrian stanielwicz

Defensive Midfielder: 45 Ayman Azhil

Right Winger: 9 Leon Bailey

Left Winger: 22 Rakim Rex

Centre Forward: 13 Lucas Alario

Vs

Borussia Dortmund: 4-2-3-1

GK: 1 R. Burki

LB: 13 R. Guerreiro

CB: 2 D. Zagadou

CB: 15 M. Hummels

RB: 16 M. Akanji

CM: 28 A. Witsel

CM: 27 E. Can

LM: 7 J. Sancho

RM: 5 A. Hakimi

ST: 17 E. Haaland

Coach: Lucien Favre

SUB:

GK: 35 Marwin Hitz

CB: 14 Nico Schulz

18 Leonardo Balerdi

26 Lukasz Piszczk

29 Marcel Schmelzer

0 Mario Götze

8 Mahmoud Dahoud

10 Thorgan Hazard

32 Giovanni Retna

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"Ladies and gentlemen, if you're just joining us, on this beautiful evening, those were the line-ups of Leverkusen and Borussia Dortmund in this Bundesliga clash." Derek Rase's voice resounded through the speakers as both teams' starting lineups appeared on the viewer's screens.

"Steward, what are your thoughts on the lineups, and what can we expect from both sides?"

"Thanks, Derek," Stewart Robson replied, clearing his throat as the camera panned across the packed BayArena, flags waving and the energy of the crowd bristling through the stands. "The first thing to note is Leverkusen's shape. A 3-4-3 with Tah, Bender, and Dragovic at the back. That's a very physical, no-nonsense defensive trio. You can bet they're preparing to absorb Dortmund's pace and power on the break."

He continued, "Dortmund, meanwhile, go with a very aggressive front line—Sancho on the left, Hakimi on the right, and of course, the biking warrior Erling Haaland through the middle. The midfield pair of Witsel and Can will try to win the physical duels and distribute quickly to those danger men."

As the two teams walked out onto the pitch to the roaring sound of 30,000 fans, the camera zoomed in briefly on the Leverkusen bench. Rakim sat there in full team tracksuit, headphones still around his neck, eyes locked on the grass as both teams got into their formation. "That is a name that we expected to see in the starting 11 with the form he's been in, how do you think his absence will affect the home side?"

"4 goals, 3 assists in the first 3 matches of February, that kind of form is priceless," Robson responded, "From what we've heard, he was originally on the team sheet, but an injury during training led to some last-minute caution from the medical staff. He's available off the bench, but you can be sure Peter Bosz won't want to risk aggravating anything unless he has to."

"Caution is probably the best course of action, but if we were to ask Rakim, I bet he'd claim otherwise." Derek retorted just as the referee completed the final checks of the game. "(FWEEET) And with the whistle, match week 21 is underway,"

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[Time: 18:30 | Bayer Leverkusen 0 vs 0 Borussia Dortmund | Cloudy, 3°C - Chance of Rain 15%]

[6]

The opening minutes saw both teams sizing each other up like heavyweight fighters in the first round of a title bout. Leverkusen, in their deep crimson kits, pressed high in short bursts, trying to bait Dortmund into playing into the wings. On the touchline, Peter Bosz stood with his hands in his pockets, carefully scanning the field.

At this point, he would usually be shouting orders, with his hands gesturing wildly, trying to cut out early mistakes. However, with Lars Bender in midfield, he found himself with nothing to critique. It seemed that the moment the captain entered the midfield, he ran a tight ship.

It was unusual for him, who usually let Tah do most of the talking in the back line, but now he was the loudest voice on the pitch. The moment someone slacked off or floated to the wrong position, they'd get an earful from the captain.

Dortmund, in their black and yellow stripes, showed patience with these developments, a rare sight for such a young team. Axel Witsel dropped deep to form a temporary back three, giving Guerreiro and Akanji license to push forward. The tempo remained brisk on both sides as the ball glided on the slick grass between both sides.

What worried the bald-headed coach, though, was the blond figure of Erling Haaland. The 19-year-old Norwegian phenom had just joined the Wasps this winter and had gotten straight to work. The boy, well man had scored 7 goals and 1 assist in his first 3 matches, and he made it look easy. The only saving grace he could find was the fact that he hadn't dealt with a defender of Tah's calibre.

However, unlike what he had been worried about, the first real spark came when Sancho picked the ball up near the halfway line. With a deft touch, he spun past Bellarabi and surged down the left. Dragovic came across, but Sancho cut inside with frightening ease, laying the ball into Haaland's path just outside the box.

Tah, who was just about to pounce on him, was left wrong-footed as the Norwegian turned with the deftness of a ballerina. The striker didn't hesitate and let it fly with a snap of his left boot from the edge of the box, his long hair flowing in the wind. Hardeckey was left rooted to his line...

Chapter 519 519 Vs Borussia Dortmund (2)



[Time: 18:36 | Bayer Leverkusen 0 – 0 Borussia Dortmund | Match Week 21 | Bundesliga]

Tah, who was just about to pounce on him, was left wrong-footed as the Norwegian turned with the deftness of a ballerina. The striker didn't hesitate and let it fly with a snap of his left boot from the edge of the box, his long hair flowing in the wind. Hardeckey was left rooted to his line, but luck was on his side as the ball sizzled just wide of the left post, kissing the outside netting.

The home fans who had been holding their breath exhaled in relief as wiping cold sweat from their brows. "You can particularly feel the sighs of relief from the home fans that shot was too close for comfort in their eyes." Derek Rae stated with a tone of disbelief as the replay of the shot appeared on the screen.

[13]

The crowd's rhythm returned after that early scare, the BayArena regaining its roar. But down on the pitch, you could sense that Haaland's chance had lit a fuse, and they could smell blood. Dortmund now operated with a more pronounced sense of urgency, with Witsel and Can stepping up to initiate their transitions faster.

Each possession they gained was followed by a direct forward pass either into the wide channels for Sancho or Hakimi, or straight to Haaland's feet like he was a human battering ram. However, Tah seemed to take the young striker more seriously, not giving him the slightest bit of breathing room. Whether it be a physical battle or light tugs of the Jersey, he used every trick in his arsenal to introduce himself to the young striker.

That's why the moment Can sent a through ball forward for the striker to run into, he put his body in between Haaland and the ball, letting it harmlessly roll into Hardeckey's arms. "Simple and neat, Tah is putting on a master class in defensive work rate," Rae commented.

"Indeed, the man's not giving Haaland the slightest room to breathe, and with a defender of his calibre giving him personal attention, this might be a tough night for the young Norwegian," Robson comments as the gameplay continued.

[18]

By the 18th minute, Leverkusen had begun to feel their way into the contest with more confidence. Amiri and Lars Bender found a rhythm in midfield, shifting the ball laterally and forward with crisp accuracy, exploiting the space between Dortmund's midfield and backline. Diaby had started to come alive, using his electric pace to cause Akanji problems with every passing minute.

The home fans responded in kind, their cheers swelling as Diaby left Akanji flat-footed with a cheeky nutmeg near the corner flag. The winger's low cross was dangerously whipped into the six-yard box, but Hummels read the flight of the ball expertly, sliding in to clear it just before Volland could pounce.

From the resulting corner, Havertz curled a high, arcing ball toward the back post. Tah climbed above Zagadou with sheer brute strength and thundered a header down toward goal, only for Bürki to get a strong hand on it and parry it wide with an instinctive reaction save.

"Excellent reflexes from the Swiss shot-stopper!" Derek Rae exclaimed as the replay showed Bürki's outstretched palm stopping what looked to be a sure goal. "That was point-blank range from Tah. You won't get many better saves all weekend."

Robson chimed in, "And that's a warning shot from Leverkusen. They're growing into this, and Dortmund need to wake up, or they're going to pay for giving up this kind of pressure."

[24]

The 24th minute saw the BayArena come alive again, but this time it wasn't in anticipation but in jubilation. The red lions had been knocking and now they managed to kick the damn door down. After a midfield tussle won by Amiri, who muscled past Can with a shoulder nudge and burst of acceleration, the ball was laid quickly to Havertz.

The young German playmaker controlled the pass with a deft first touch as he cut inwards and spotted Volland peeling off Hummels' shoulder toward the left channel. Without hesitation, Havertz clipped a perfectly weighted pass curving on the other side of Hummels, slipping past the line of defence. Volland latched onto it mid-stride, brought it down with his thigh, and with Burki charging off his line, he brought it down with his thigh, and with Burki charging off his line, he fired off a powerful shot with his left boot.

[Bayer Leverkusen 1 – 0 Borussia Dortmund]

"GOAL!!!" The BayArena erupted, flags waved like a storm, drums thundered, and a roar surged through the stands that felt like it shook the concrete beneath their feet. "Kevin Volland! A striker's finish through and through," shouted Derek Rae over the cacophony. "And Havertz—what vision! What a pass! Just look at a thing of beauty. Pure class."

Stewart Robson chimed in, "Hummels was simply too late to react, just half a second too late, but that's all the on-form Volland needed. This is what happens when you give Havertz time to operate—he'll hurt you." Volland ran toward the corner flag, fist clenched, sliding on one knee before being swarmed by his teammates.

The goal gave the home side the dose of courage they needed to shift things up a gear. They began playing like a like zoo lions who, for the first time, got a taste for the hunt. The euphoria one feels after hunting down a prey much bigger than oneself and drawing blood.

Their wingbacks, Sinkgraven and Bellarabi, became the busiest on the pitch as they actively pushed higher on attacks. They would often overlap with their wingers or midfielders, forming dynamic attacking situations on the flanks. Diaby especially became active on the left flank, often taking Akanji on runs down the flank using his nimble feet to put pressure on the full back.

However, Dortmund was known as the second-strongest team in the Bundesliga for a reason, despite being a factory for talent. True to their mascot, the wasp, in the 33rd minute, they struck back. Guerreiro intercepted a pass intended for Bellarabi and immediately launched a fast break. He combined with Sancho down the left, and with a flicked backheel, the Englishman broke into the box.

Hardeckey, who had been charging out, was forced to lunge right, trying to close down the near post, but Sancho's shot was too slippery. "SANCHOOOO!" Derek Rae exclaimed, matching the excitement of the 10,000 away fans who jumped up from their seats in Joy.

The net continued to ripple for a moment, but Sancho was already racing to the corner flag. The away section of the BayArena exploded in yellow ecstasy, flags unfurling and scarves spinning overhead. "And just like that, Dortmund strike back!" Rae continued. "Jadon Sancho, calm as you like! A low finish into the near corner kissed it off the post!"

Stewart Robson added with a grim nod, "You can't give him that kind of time in the box. That's criminal. Bellarabi's mistake on the wing gave them the springboard, and Sancho did the rest. What a response from Dortmund."

Peter Bosz threw his hands up in frustration on the sideline, shouting something unintelligible at Bellarabi, who wore a sheepish expression as he jogged back toward midfield. The deadlock came as a surprise, but the tempo only continued to spike with neither team willing to give an inch. If the first twenty minutes had been a game of chess with masters probing their opponents' moves at every turn.

Now the game resembled speed checkers with gasoline poured on the board. Tackles flew in everywhere the ball went, with no one being given the chance to comfortably hold onto the ball. Volland and Hummels clashed mid-air in a fierce duel following a chipped pass from Amiri.

Despite the exchange of heated words, the duel remained clean, and play continued as Lars continued to bark orders. However, it became progressively clear that Dortmund had the momentum, winning 2/3 of the tackles.

[38]

However, just as Dortmund surged forward looking for a second, Leverkusen hit back. It started with a seemingly harmless throw-in near the halfway line on the right. Bellarabi received the ball and zipped a diagonal ball into Havertz, who had ghosted between Zagadou and Witsel.

The silky number 29 took one touch with the outside of his boot and turned sharply, drawing a roar from the crowd as he accelerated into space. In full flow, his strides ate up yards of grass as his head continued turning left and right, scanning the area. He spotted Diaby breaking into the box from the left and threaded a through ball that split the defenders like a surgeon's scalpel.

Diaby didn't break stride. With Burki closing him down fast and the angle tightening, he chipped the ball cheekily around the lunging keeper. A collective gasp was followed by thunderous shouts from the Leverkusen fans.

"GOAL! Moussa Diaby, take a bow!" shouted Rae, almost laughing from disbelief. "That is outrageous! Ice in his veins, and Havertz—again the architect!"

Robson's voice followed quickly. "Dortmund's midfield was nowhere. Havertz was given the keys to the kingdom and picked the treasury clean. What composure from Diaby, just wonderful to watch."

Chapter 520 520 Atlantis Fund

[Time: 19:14 | Bayer Leverkusen 2 – 1 Borussia Dortmund | Match Week 21 | Bundesliga]

[44]

The game surged into its final five minutes of the first half with a manic tempo. Dortmund, stunned by Diaby's audacity, refused to retreat. Lucien Favre barked instructions from the sideline, urging his players to calm down and reset their structure. But with the crowd roaring and Leverkusen players sensing blood, structure was the last thing on anyone's mind.

Axel Witsel tried to slow things with a few sideways passes, but the pressure from Lars Bender and Amiri was relentless. He barely had time to control the ball before being hounded by either of the two midfielders. It wasn't just him; every player started feeling the pressure from the home side, leading to a poor pass from Witsel under pressure, which forced Guerreiro to turn back, and Volland nearly intercepted it.

But nearly wasn't good enough—because the moment Guerreiro turned back toward his own box, he didn't account for Havertz on the wing closing down at full sprint. The right winger lunged forward and poked the ball off Guerreiro's toe just as he tried to play it back to his keeper. A foot Race ensued between him and Burki, chasing the loose ball that now trickled towards the six-yard box.

Havertz, being closer to the ball, reached it first, but Burki was but a meter in front of him. The pressure was immense, but Kai didn't hesitate in sweeping his left foot across the ball. Despite it being his weaker foot to a player of his calibre that didn't mean much as he sent the ball curling around the keeper heading to the far corner.

Burki wasn't there for show, though, as he began adjusting his stance the moment Havertz drew his legs back. Planting his body tensed for a second, and the moment the ball was struck, even before the sound reached him, he sprang into action. He launched himself to his right like a man shot out of a cannon, arm outstretched, fingertips twitching for impact.

Seeing the wickedly spinning ball get closer, he smacked his right palm forward, his gloved hand firmly hitting the centre of the ball. The contact was clean, sending the ball flying to the chest of Hummels, forcing the experienced defender to adapt. He did so by using his body to hold off Lars, who had sneaked forward as he deftly brought the ball down.

Killing the momentum, he set it flying towards the right flank for a throw-in. "Heroic actions by Roman Burki and clinical follow-through Mats," Rae commented with excitement as the arena finally dared to breathe. "Guerreiro will be thanking his lucky stars that his teammates came through for him."

"Absolutely, Derek," Stewart Robson followed. "That's what experience buys you—Hummels reading the danger and calming the play down in one movement. Burki's save might be forgotten in the stats, but that's one of the most crucial moments of the half."

[45+2]

The referee glanced at his watch as the ball was thrown back into play by Hakimi on the far side. Dortmund was desperate not to concede again before the break, and so they played it safe, stringing together short, controlled passes in their own half. The home side tried their best to pressure them, but the wasps showed grace under pressure, holding out until the whistle for the halftime break blew.

(FWEET, FWEEET)

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[Half-Time Analysis – BayArena | Bayer Leverkusen 2 – 1 Borussia Dortmund]

"That is all she wrote in the first half along the Rhine. Leverkusen comes out on top with 2 goals, while the visitors walk into the locker room trailing with 1," Derek Rae stated as the players began making their way off the field. "Steward, what's your take on this first half?"

"Derek, it's been an absolute whirlwind of a half," Stewart Robson replied as the camera panned to the players exiting the tunnel, sweat glistening on their brows and their shoulders tense. "Dortmund started well—sharp on the press, good tempo through the middle—but it's Leverkusen who've imposed their will. And let's be honest, the difference-maker has been Kai Havertz."

The broadcast cut to highlights: Diaby's sensational goal, Volland's exceptional control of the chipped through ball before rifling a shot past Burki. Havertz's various runs were shown on the screen and Burki's last-ditch save that denied a third just before the whistle.



"Leverkusen's tactical shape has been incredibly compact," Robson continued. "Their midfield pairing—Lars Bender and Amiri—has made life miserable for Witsel and Can. They're forcing errors with intensity and turning them into instant attacks."

As replays played of Leverkusen's two goals, Rae added, "And you have to appreciate the composure in the final third. The decision-making has been razor-sharp. Volland and Diaby have caused havoc with their movement, and Havertz is playing like he has a joystick controller in his head."

The camera shifted back to the pitch side reporters as both teams disappeared from view. A graphic on the screen popped up with first-half stats: Possession: Leverkusen 48% – Dortmund 52% Shots on Target: Leverkusen 5 – Dortmund 3 Fouls: Leverkusen 8 – Dortmund 6 Pass Accuracy: Leverkusen 84% – Dortmund 87% Distance Covered: Leverkusen 57.2 km – Dortmund 55.9 km.

"Interesting that Dortmund edged the possession and passing metrics," Rae pointed out, "but the real story is the territory. Leverkusen have forced the ball into dangerous areas more consistently."

Then, with a smile in his voice, he added, "And Stewart—just before halftime, we saw Rakim Rex warming up down on the touchline. What do you think, could we see the young phenom introduced in the second half?"

Robson chuckled. "Well, Derek, if I were Bosz, I'd be tempted. You're already ahead, but imagine adding Rakim's explosiveness to that left flank, especially now that Akanji's legs are wearing down. The kid's got goals in his boots, and if Dortmund push too high, there'll be space to exploit."

"Whatever the case, don't go anywhere, folks. Leverkusen lead 2–1 at the break in this electrifying Bundesliga clash, but with the intensity both teams are playing at, I can see goals in their future; the second half could flip at any moment..." Derek's voice trailed off as the commercials cut on the screen.

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[Location: Atlantis Fund, 42nd floor Goliath Building, Wall Street, Manhattan, | Time: 13:30]

A 20-seat obsidian table bisected the conference room like a runway of polished night. Outside the floor-to-ceiling glass, February drizzle streaked New York's skyline; inside, numbers bled red across the eight wall-mounted Bloomberg terminals. The room was currently silent, unlike the trading floor outside the doors, as everyone's attention was focused on the man at the end of the table.

Victor Parker, dressed in a \$2,000 navy Giovanni suit, could be seen leaning over the table with his fingers interlocked. His slightly long hair was trimmed a tad with the sides cut in a light fade, but it was his piercing blue eyes that captured everyone's attention. He exuded natural charisma at the apex of the table despite the gloomy atmosphere that persisted like a bad cold.

A platinum trident pin with the fund's insignia of a city submerged in golden water glinted on his left lapel. From his confident demeanour, one couldn't tell that he was currently sitting at a US\$2 billion deficit on private client investment. The fund's main portfolio that he led had been torpedoed, and in his effort to double down on his next investment, he only ended up losing more.

The solution to this problem came in the form of the long-term private fund each named partner ran. When they merged to create Atlantis fund, it was written in the charter that each partner had the right to privately manage the funds they attracted from individuals they themselves had attracted. This only worked for individual funds, not the money businesses entrusted to them to manage.

Using this loophole, Victor has been cycling money from the closed private fund to cover the deficit in his portfolio. However, starting last year, he had been trying his best to clear his books with calculated bets; however, now something came up that threw a wrench in his plans. "Shall we get this emergency meeting on the way?" he asked the room as he nodded for the project manager to take the stage.

To his right, Alexandra "Lex" Wu, the First Trident partner, traced a stylus over her tablet, lips pursed. On the far wall, a 98-inch screen displayed Lorenzo "Enzo" Giordano, the Third Trident, dialling in from the Geneva office—espresso in hand, Alpine twilight behind him.

Alexandra took that as her cue to present the progress of the M&M Acquisition, heels clicking once on the marble inlay. Her tablet's screen, mirrored to the wall, displayed a forest of candlesticks sliding downhill beside a headline banner, "SOFTBANK EYES EXIT — \$9.5 BN RESCUE AT RISK."

"Current chatter out of Tokyo is they'll trigger the MAC clause by quarter-end," Lex began, voice clipped, Singaporean accent surfacing when she was irritated. "If SoftBank walks, WeWork's covenants trip immediately. On mark-to-market, we're looking at a \$740 million impairment by next Monday's close, plus contingent liabilities on the 'keep-open' leases."